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Carl Van Vechten and the Twenties: Literature, Society and the Arts

Edward G. Lueders

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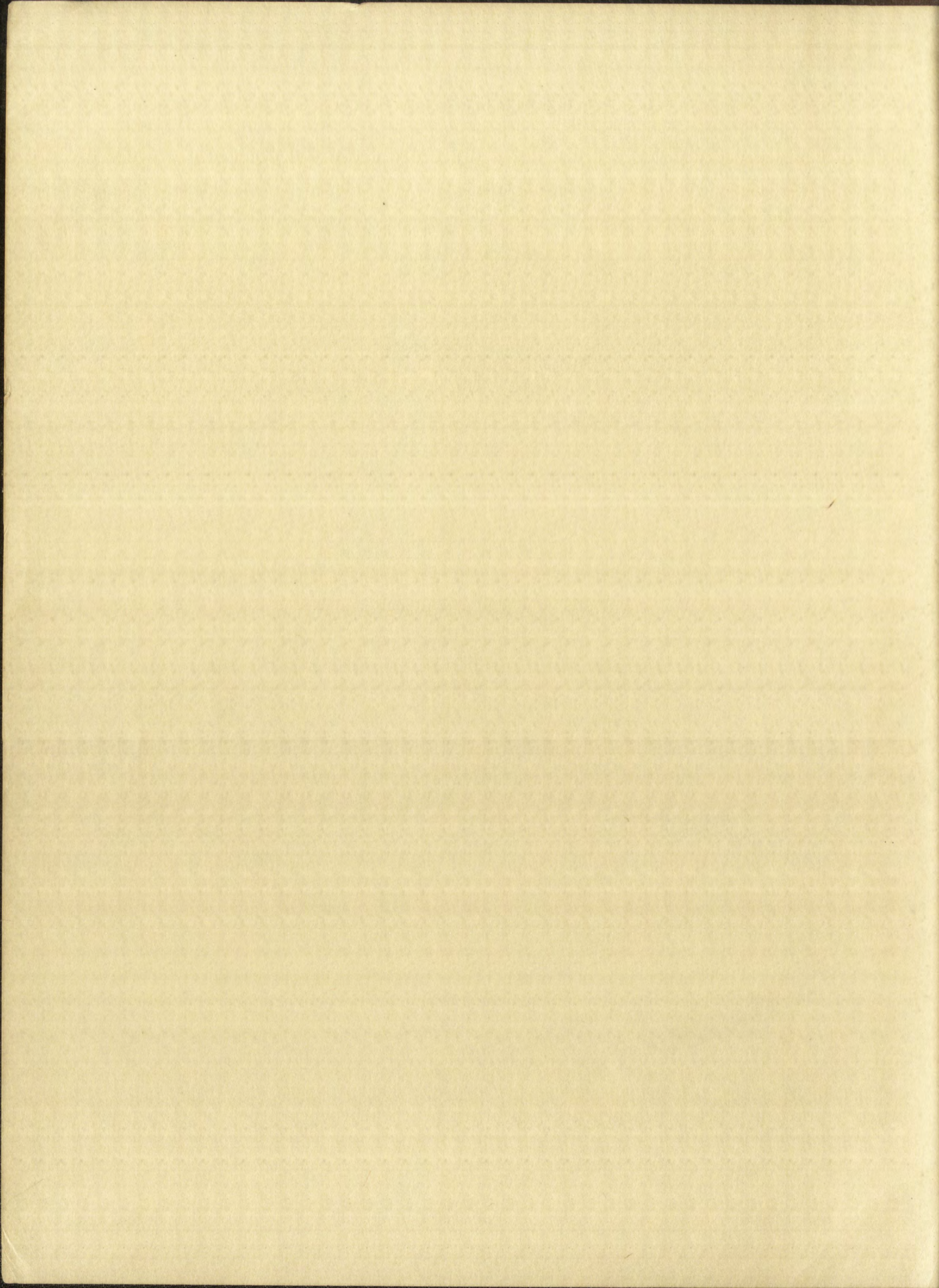
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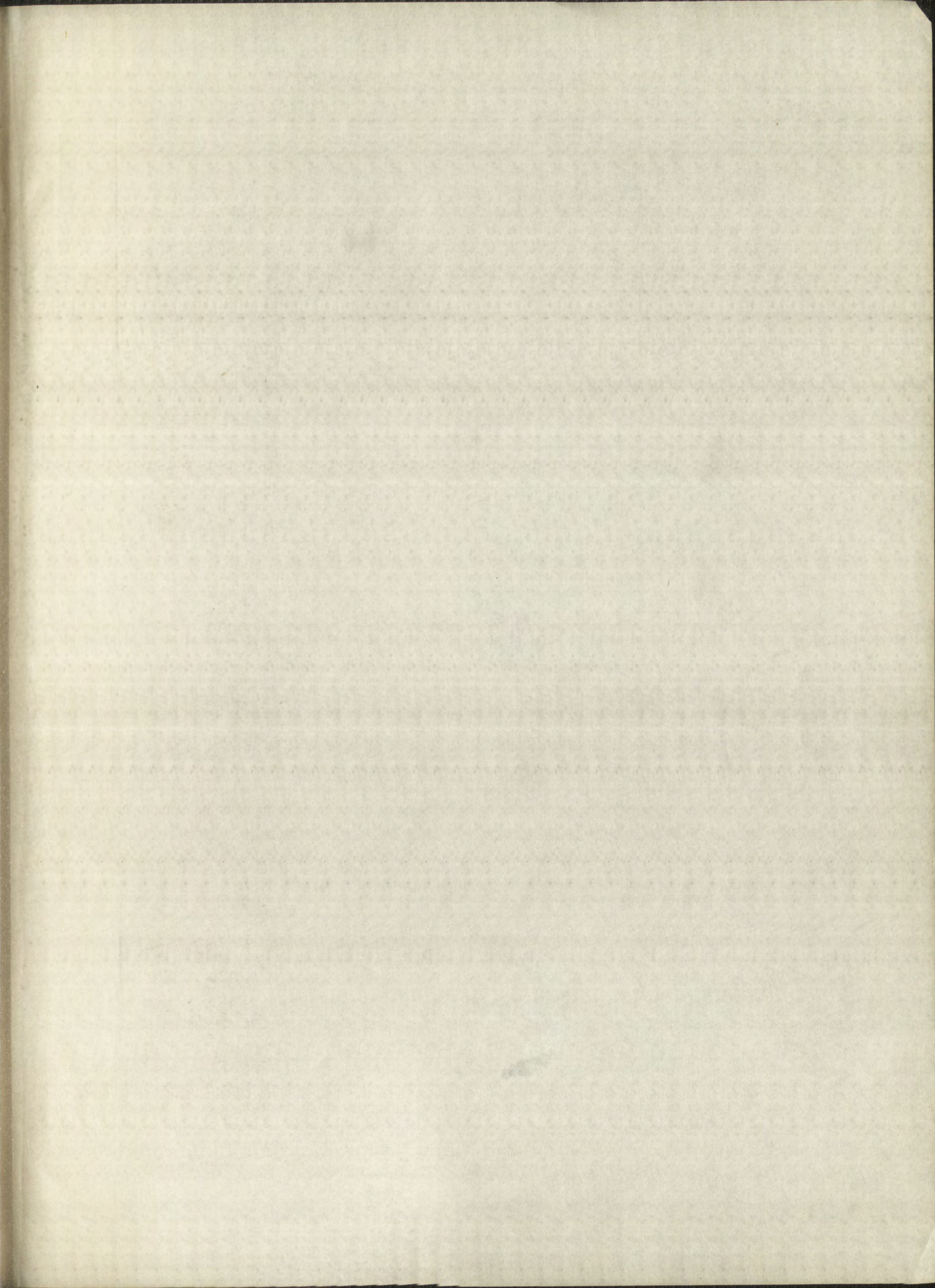
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CARL VAN VECHTEN AND THE TWENTIES:
LITERATURE, SOCIETY AND THE ARTS

By
Edward G. Lueders

A Thesis
In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
Of Doctor of Philosophy
In American Studies

The University of New Mexico
1952

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Edward C. Ingers

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This dissertation, directed and approved by the candidate's committee, has been accepted by the Graduate Committee of the University of New Mexico in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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DATE

4/1/52

CARL VAN VECHTEN AND THE TWENTIES:
LITERATURE, SOCIETY AND THE ARTS

Committee

George Arms

CHAIRMAN

Hugh M. Miller

George Winston Smith

T. M. Pearce

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PREFACE

It is seldom that a critical assessment of a writer's work can even attempt to be definitive during the writer's lifetime. It is even more rare when that writer continues as an active observer, participant and contributor in the humanities for two decades after publishing his last book and publicly announcing his retirement from writing. But such a writer is Carl Van Vechten. His first volume was published in 1915, his last in 1932. In those seventeen years he produced nineteen volumes, ten of them collections of essays on music and the arts, two devoted to the lore of the cat, and seven of them highly individualistic novels. Through them all, in addition to the genial personality of their author, runs the revolt and the search for release, the strength and the sickness of the unique American era that produced them.

Generally, the work of Van Vechten is now relegated to the lists of authors and titles which fill out discussions of our literature in the Twenties. Critics such as Alfred Kazin (On Native Grounds) and Oscar Cargill (Intellectual America) have accepted his work with carefully qualified appreciation, citing it as sophisticated and symptomatic addenda to the period. As the

Twenties come more clearly into focus, however, it becomes evident that there is much in Van Vechten which was source as well as symptom. The restless movement, the pace, and the acceleration that animate and characterize the American scene today faced only a small portion of America before the First World War. With the tremendous growth in the individual's mobility and awareness of his time in the Twenties came a social environment and philosophy which thrived on speed and novelty--a singular combination of the ancient metaphysical theories of Heraclitus, philosopher of flux, and the modern physical laws of acceleration. This social impulse is found in the books of Carl Van Vechten. It has since become, more firmly than ever, the mark of our time and place.

This study is offered in the belief that its subject deserves representation-at-large in our revaluation of the Twenties, and that our literary histories of the future might well find the books of Van Vechten deserving of more attention than has so far been granted them. As a critic of music and the arts, he was a vigorous prophet of twentieth-century taste and accomplishment. As a representative of the intellectual and aesthetic spirit of the Twenties, he was an authentic spokesman. As a novelist, he combined the virtues of a

Twentieth century more clearly than ever, however, is the fact
evident that America was in a position to make a great
as well as a symbol. The resulting movement, the fact, and
the association of the name of the author and the name of the
scene today, is only a small portion of the American scene
the first world war. But the scene is not only in the
individuals who lived and worked at the time in the
Twentieth century a social environment, and the fact that
thrived on speed and novelty--a kind of combination of
the ancient and modern, the old and the new, the old and
other of the past, and the modern, physical, and the
tion. This social change is found in the book of the
Van Vechten. It has since passed, and it is clear
ever, the end of our time and place.
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subject deserves representation in the history of the
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deserving of more attention than has been given to it
then. As a critic of the past and the future, he was a
vigorous proponent of the Twentieth century and the
pessimism. As a representative of the intellectual and
aesthetic spirit of the Twentieth century, he was a
spokesman. As a novelist, he combined the richness of a

stylist, an ironic satirist, and a sophisticated entertainer to chronicle aspects of his age caught as successfully by none of his contemporaries. As a literary personality, he infused all his work with a charm and urbanity refreshingly distinct in an era of literary introspection and pessimism.

My indebtedness to the friends whose encouragement and aid has seen me through the preparation of this work is inadequately represented by any catalogue of their names. To Dr. George Arms of the University of New Mexico I owe my initial momentum. His colleagues, Dr. Hugh M. Miller and Dr. George W. Smith, helped me in the backgrounds for the sections on Music and Society, while Dr. T. M. Pearce assisted me in special research. Dr. C. V. Wicker gave me welcome encouragement through many stages of the work. Among the librarians who served me with professional skill and personal interest were Helen McIntyre of the University of New Mexico, Katherine-Louise Henning of the General Library, University of Wisconsin, Margaret Donnell of the Indiana State Library, Rosemary Demaree of Purdue University, and Robert W. Hill of the New York Public Library. Mabel Dodge Luhan of Taos and Cora Headington of Corrales, New Mexico, followed my progress with flattering interest and read the initial manuscript.

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personality, he infused all his work with a sense of
urgency and responsibility, almost as if he were
interrogating and questioning.
The investigation of the individual's role in society
was not and did not seem to be a new or original
work is inadequately represented by any single
their names. To Dr. George Kline of the University of
New Mexico I owe my initial introduction to his colleagues.
Dr. Hugh S. Miller and Dr. George S. Miller, his colleagues
in the background for the past one or two years and
while Dr. T. M. Fisher assisted me in several respects.
Dr. C. V. Miller also was a constant and encouraging presence
any stage of the work. I and the I. M. Miller who served
me with professional skill and personal interest were
Helen McIntyre of the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque.
Louis Hanning of the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque.
Wisconsin, Eugene Howell of the Indiana State Library,
Rosemary Hanning of Indiana University, and Robert H.
Bill of the New York Public Library, New York.
of Texas and Iowa. Hanning of Colorado, New Mexico,
followed my progress with flattering interest and read
the initial manuscript.

Above all, I am grateful to Carl Van Vechten for accepting so cordially both me and my project, and for making available to me, with only the vaguest idea of the use to which they might be put, materials which would have been difficult or impossible to acquire without his personal aid.

Above all, I am grateful to the Government for
accepting so completely my work, and for
making available to me, and only the value of
the use to which they put, materials which
have been difficult or impossible to acquire without
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY SURVEY

During World War II John O'Hara, himself a veteran of the social and literary wars of the Twenties, asked rhetorically, "If I were to get on the squawk-box and say to Fighting 18: 'Now hear this: Carl Van Vechten is aboard and will be pleased to answer any questions'-- would the fighter pilots know what the hell to ask him?" O'Hara indicated his doubt and added, ". . .you might care to know that Van Vechten's slim volumes had a little of the same screwy life that was caught by Fitzgerald in The Great Gatsby."¹

Actually, Van Vechten's volumes were not slim, and they contained considerably more than a little of "the same screwy life" caught by Fitzgerald in The Great Gatsby. But O'Hara's estimate of their neglect, just two decades after their popularity was assumed by the reading public in the phrase "The Van Vechten Vogue," is correct. Perhaps their very contemporaneousness with the times that produced them is chiefly responsible for their rapid decline in notoriety (a more fitting

¹John O'Hara in The Portable F. Scott Fitzgerald (New York: The Viking Press, 1945), p. xviii.

INTRODUCTION

During World War II John O'Hara, himself a veteran

of the social and literary wars of the twenties, asked rhetorically, "If I were to get on the news-stand and say to fighting men: 'How does it feel? How does it feel?' I should and will be pleased to answer any question."

would the fighter please know what the hell he was doing? O'Hara indicated his doubt and added, "... you might care

to know that Van Vechten's aim was to have a little of the same nerveless life that was sought by Fitzgerald in

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with the times that produced them is chiefly responsible

for their rapid decline in popularity (a more fitting

¹John O'Hara in the Portland Press, about 1945.
(New York: The Viking Press, 1955), p. xviii.

word than "reputation" when discussing any aspect of their era). At any rate, the annals of the age, whether they concern themselves with social, literary, or intellectual history, can ill afford to neglect the volumes that came from the pen of this writer between 1915 and 1932.

General Setting of His Work

The social aberrations of the Twenties make a gaudy catalogue. The decade had many aspects of a national debauch, yet the national conviction of well-being persisted. The ten-year glitter may have been one of fool's gold, but the glitter was no less attractive for that. Even those who recognized the metal of the times for what it was were often content and proud to harmonize with their surroundings, admitting with T. S. Eliot's prophetic Prufrock that they were "almost, at times, the Fool." The capitalization made all the difference, for wasn't the Fool a professional jester behind whose antics and whirling words lay a sage commentary on the scene? If, as Walter Lippmann proclaimed by adapting Aristophanes to his generation in A Preface to Morals, Whirl was king, Carl Van Vechten was--among other things--its Fool.

Seldom has a distinctive era in American life been so sour in its inception, so rampant in its course,

word than "reputation" which is a mere echo of
their era). As an era, the American of the 1930s
they concern those who are living, thinking or acting
factual history, can all afford to neglect the fact
that came from the pen of this writer in 1935 and
1936.

General Setting of the Story

The social atmosphere of the 1930s was
gaily catatonic. The decade had been marked by a
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difference, for wasn't the fool a great national leader
behind whose action and striving words lay a sure comfort
tany on the scene? If, as Walter Dym had maintained
by adapting Aristophanes to his generation in a play
to morals, "What was king, that was goodness was--"
other things--the fool.

Seldom has a distinctive era in American life
been so soon in its inception, so marked in its course,

so complete in its collapse. Economically, the Twenties began with the sudden slump in the price of securities on the New York Stock Exchange in November, 1919, heralding the end of the war boom which had seen the country through the Wilson era. The finale came on October 23, 1929, with the catastrophic climax to bull market speculation, the same exchange being swamped with 16,410,000 shares in one day. Politically the era began by turning almost militantly on the Wilsonian idealism which the nation had clung to fervently through the war. The popular alternative was a return to "normalcy" under Harding, long a servant of special interests, and his successor, Calvin Coolidge, who epitomized his philosophy of government in the assertion that "The business of the United States is business," a statement that appeared to be a cathartic but proved to be a conundrum. The conclusion of the era found the nation just as militant against "normalcy" and big business, symbolized by Herbert Hoover's continuation of the Republican regime, as it had been against Wilsonian idealism ten years before. By the time the Greek tragedy of Hoover's gallant stand had run its course in 1932, the nation brought the merry-go-round of the Twenties full circle by returning the reins to the Democrats and Franklin Roosevelt's promise of a New Deal.

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Sandwiched in between these events was a decade of social and intellectual revolt that moved from disillusion to dissolution in its search for the elusive goal of self-realization. Beginning in the dull resentment of post-war reality, the general atmosphere of the Twenties grew in cynicism, lawlessness, intolerance, and bitterness. The spiritual strength and security which had bolstered generations of Americans was untenable to vast numbers who searched for intellectual balance in a world of cold reality, with the beam of twentieth-century science revealing strange, uncomfortable corners of the universe and the soul. A generation which, in the words of one diagnostician reviewing its symptoms at the decade's end, had "awakened to the fact that both the ends which its fathers proposed to themselves and the emotions from which they drew their strength seem irrelevant and remote,"¹ faced the need of a new intellectual code, a new reason for existence. The search turned its range from eternity to the moment, symbolized most picturesquely, perhaps, by the sophisticate's ceaseless quest throughout the Prohibition era of an unholy grail. "The Lost Generation," Gertrude Stein's familiar phrase

¹Joseph Wood Krutch, The Modern Temper (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1929), p. 24.

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quest throughout the revolution and of anarchy itself.
"The Lost Generation," perhaps Jack's English phrase

¹ Joseph Wood Krutch, The Modern Temper (New York:
Harcourt, Brace, 1929), p. 24.

for the authors, artists, and intellectuals of the Twenties, contains an ambiguity which doubles its aptness: lost as a person who cannot find his way and lives in confusion, and (one wonders how consciously Miss Stein was aware of it) also in the sense of one lost to salvation, abandoned to sin.

Much of the American's world was whittled down to the moment. The term modern (which, like everything else, became dated and gave way to modernistic) would serve as well as any for a keynote. More than ever before the new--the thing of the latest moment--became almost violently desirable and important. Science and business combined to subdivide time and space in everyday life through the production and sales of automobiles, airplanes, radios and the movies. Business, discovering that its goal of ever-increasing production-and-expansion depended largely on this public deification of the latest thing, bombarded the willing populace with the assertion that every change was progress, that everything new was bigger and/or better. The essential ingredients of revolt and experiment in the atmosphere of the Twenties served as catalytic agents leading to some of the most lasting accomplishments and some of the most grotesque excesses achieved in the nation's history, but everything, good or bad, seemed to make its appearance headlong.

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excesses achieved in the nation's history, but everything
good or bad, seemed to have its own strange meaning.

There is much of record to offset the failures of the Twenties, the symptomatic irresponsibility present at all levels of society, the farce of Prohibition and its fruits of lawlessness, the drunkenness, the intellectual dishonesty, the gross immorality, and the sophomoric indignity of a nervous society inclined to notoriety for its own sake. To balance the Prohibition laws was the Nineteenth Amendment, extending the democratic franchise to women and dealing the most substantial blow to the double standard in our history. Commercial expansion raised America to a level of production more commensurate with its tremendous potential. The comforts and conveniences of the common man multiplied more rapidly than during any previous period, and his opportunities for recreation were more varied and readily available than ever before.

Curiously, though, and consistent with an age that featured paradox on every hand, these gains were responsible for some of the most notorious excesses of the time. Women, granted the right to vote, demanded and took their new freedom wherever they could find it, and the scandalous flapper with her mannish clothes and conscious impertinence emerged. In the flush of expansion, business over-produced, over-reached itself,

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sion, business over-produced, over-reached itself,

standardized in its demands for quantity buying and selling, and supported its aims and means through the ballyhoo of that monster with its head in the legendary position of an ostrich and its arms working like an octopus: advertising. The conveniences offered the masses, coupled with the easy credit of installment buying, hastened the bankruptcy of the country by hamstringing the common man, who found himself forever paying for last month's washing machine, automobile, radio, or house furnishings out of this month's pay check. His recreations led to a new kind of national hysteria over games, fads, physical and mental exercise that laid him open to any charlatan willing to go big-time, and, above all, celebrities, the kings and queens of the movies, sports, the radio, and all forms of mass entertainment.

Even in the arts, which were expanding along with everything else in the growth of the Twenties, was the excess bred of a national demand for novelty. With popular taste following notoriety, availability, and ballyhoo, it is not surprising that so much ephemera and so much charlatanism found a ready market. What is surprising, however, is the solid, lasting contributions to the arts remaining now that the ephemera has had its day. Out of the social and intellectual revolt of the

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day. Out of the social and intellectual revolt of the

times came a release in the arts which America and Americans had never before accomplished. Much of it was due to expansion, both geographical and intellectual. Sophistication demanded a more mature approach to art, and experiment required a knowledge of what had been attempted. The war years had left America with a new consciousness, in many instances first-hand, of the European continent. A society tired of being contained, rebellious at being restrained, found its spokesmen in artists, musicians, and writers who helped them feel modern, new, different, and revolutionary. It was, as Burton Rascoe has written, "an age of coming of age in literature and the other arts; an age in which our national provincialism gave way to the infiltration of a degree of international culture and foreign ideas."¹ American artists discovered that a more cultivated sensitivity was approachable once the provincial barriers were down, and the spirit of cultural revolt and experiment opened that approach to them. The American audience for literature, art, music, and the theatre grew in proportion as these arts supplied them with an initiation into the sophisticated elect. The electric age was upon

¹Burton Rascoe, We Were Interrupted (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1947), p. 8.

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were down, and the spirit of cultural revolt and revolt-
ment opened that approach to them. The American audience
for literature, art, music, and the sciences grew in pro-
portion as these arts supplied them with an initiation
into the sophisticated world. The artistic and scientific

¹Burton Rascoe, *So Were We* (New York: Doubleday, 1957), p. 57.

us and the public was willingly accepting a national shock treatment.

To the artists, writers, and musicians, however, the revolt took the character of a mission as well as a diversion. The ferment was not as new as the public thought; it had merely been awaiting the ripening of the time. John Chamberlain in his Farewell to Reform (1932), caught the scene in a brief paragraph:

When Woodrow Wilson took the oath of office in 1913, the movement had gathered something approaching a real momentum. Mencken and Nathan, their brows touched by the consecrating wands of Percival Pollard and James Huneker, were beginning to work in tandem. Insatiable young souls just out of Yale, Paul Rosenfeld and Waldo Frank, had caught a glimpse of an America transformed by art from the camera work of Alfred Stieglitz. Boys and girls who had seen Isadora Duncan dance, who had listened to Emma Goldman define anarchism, who had caught the infectious dental grin of Roosevelt, became sick of the tepid loyalties of their fathers. Decorum was no word for the day.¹

It was on such a stage that Carl Van Vechten, first as critic and later as novelist, aware of both the mission and the diversion and equally of himself, played his role.

Contributions to Music

In 1917, Van Vechten wrote:

Musical criticism has two purposes: one, and perhaps the most important, is to entertain the

¹John Chamberlain, Farewell to Reform (New York: Liveright, 1932), pp. 276-277.

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reader; because criticism, like any other form of literature, should stand by itself and not lean too heavily on the matter of which it treats; the other is to interest the reader in music, or in books about music, or in musicians. Criticism can be informing without being pedantic; it can prod the pachydermal hide of a conservative old fogey concert-goer without deviating from the facts."¹

In an essay of 1919, he added after some good-natured ridicule of critics who propose rules by which art can be measured, "It seems to me that the 'impressionistic' critic who expresses his personal preferences is much more likely to light up his subject. He is not tied down by a theory."² Together these declarations come as close as any to the critical creed which Van Vechten consistently applied in the discussion of any art.

Such a creed was not exactly new, but it was particularly suitable for a critic writing in an age which was just discovering Continental innovations in the arts, ridiculing the academic platitudes of the "professors," and turning avidly to anything which would lead to an individual sophistication of taste. Some of Van Vechten's battles had been fought and won by James Huneker and Lawrence Gilman before he entered the fray,

¹Carl Van Vechten, Interpreters and Interpretations (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1917), p. 363.

²Carl Van Vechten, In the Garret (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1920), p. 127.

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¹Carl Van Vechten, *Interpreters and Interpreted* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1917), p. 355.

²Carl Van Vechten, *In the Artist* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1920), p. 127.

and the odds against their "impressionistic" criticism had dropped considerably by the time Van Vechten's books sought a reading audience. It was still the same war on stuffiness and blind tradition in 1915 and 1920 as it had been in 1900. The difference was that a part of the wilderness was ready to listen to the voices now. The iconoclast was in vogue; revolt and experiment had appointed him.

Music criticism has had a distinguished history in America.¹ From the essays and reviews of John S. Dwight's Journal of Music, founded in 1852, to the sophisticated essays of armchair conversationalists such as Huneker and Van Vechten, our writings on music have maintained a growing tradition of literary bent and merit. In the middle years, the Old Guard of Henry E. Krehbiel, Henry T. Finck, William Foster Apthorp, W. J. Henderson, and Van Vechten's mentor of the Times, Richard Aldrich, had written solid, substantial books, essays, and reviews calculated to educate the American public in matters musical and properly dignified by Oscar Thompson with the collective title, "The American

¹For a more detailed account of the subject and an estimate of the place of such critics as Huneker, Paul Rosenfeld, and Van Vechten, see my essay "Music Criticism in America," American Quarterly, III (Summer, 1951), 142-151.

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School of Criticism."¹ But the points of irritation here for a critic like Van Vechten were the limiting adjectives: American, (isolation, ingrown tradition, provincialism) and School (judgment according to predetermined artistic formula, "theory," narrowness, rigid consistency, suspended animation). The arts were alive to Carl Van Vechten and his writing sought to recreate that life. Sentimental or informative exposition was an insufficient method in itself; what was needed, and what his essays supplied, was the vitality, the aesthetic evocation of the artistic experience itself. Paul Henry Lang has written suggestively about this matrix of method, and the somewhat mystical quality of his words can be dissolved in the example of Van Vechten's essays: "The critic is a man in whom the spiritual content of a work of art becomes an experience of vital force. This experience acquires in his writing a life of its own, it becomes a profession of faith, a point of view."²

There is, unfortunately, no objective method of accurately determining the influence of a critic, but there is presumptive evidence that as a critic Van Vechten

¹Oscar Thompson, "An American School of Criticism," Musical Quarterly, XXIII (Oct., 1937), 428.

²Paul Henry Lang, "The Musical Journalist," Music and Criticism: A Symposium, ed. by Richard F. French (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948), p. 140.

was no idle singer of an empty day. He was anything but idle, his day was as crowded with activity as any in our history, and the perspective of thirty years shows him to be either an influence or a prophet in American music--probably both. His was the loudest, most insistent voice calling for recognition of the musical revolution. At a time when the names of Stravinsky, Satie, Ornstein, Schoenberg, and others of their revolutionary ilk were unknown to the many and anathema to the remaining few, Van Vechten was a defender of their experiments and a champion of their art. The outspoken heresy of such advocacies now that the cause has been long won is difficult to appreciate. His record of "firsts" is impressive. His extensive and scholarly study, The Music of Spain, was the first book in our language to give the subject general coverage, and the only ambitious treatment of Spanish music in English for many years. He was the first to write at any length and with informed appreciation of the Russian Ballet, the musical activities of the foreign language theatre in New York, and the new theories of stage decoration for opera stemming from Adolphe Appia and Gordon Craig.

Above all, he introduced into his essays the attitude toward music at large in America which has,

with its spread both horizontally and vertically through the media of the phonograph, radio, sound movies, and popular orchestras, since become the only whole approach to the subject. Van Vechten wrote with enthusiasm and imagination of the opportunities suggested by music in the early movie houses, of the promise in American musicals and vaudeville, of music in its more natural settings away from the artificiality of the concert hall, and of American jazz which, although he admitted it might not be all we might wish for, constituted for him the best hope in sight for a distinctive American music. Music appealed to Van Vechten without its academic aspects and its traditional trappings. He continually fought the misconception that because anything was entertaining or popular--or both--it was to receive critical scorn. In this respect he was the only critic of his generation to anticipate both in spirit and in prophecy the metamorphosis in our music since the Twenties, the tremendous growth in its popular aspects and the ensuing utilization of such a variety in musical fare for our everyday listening that the traditional gap between classical or serious music and popular music is to be found only by the static traditional ear.

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Van Vechten's remaining contribution to music criticism is perhaps his most characteristic. Always alive to the great moments in art, he led his readers to the performer, the interpreter who gave body, personality, and reality to an artistic creation. This appreciation of performance as the fulfillment of conception is typical of Van Vechten's search for animation, for uniqueness in art. In terms of the society of the times, it may be viewed as a prelude to the celebrity-worship of the Twenties, the deification of the glamorous, successful personality, but to Van Vechten it was more than this. In the interpretations of Mary Garden, Waslav Nijinsky, Olive Fremstad and the other performers who gratified his eye and ear, he found art in motion, realized and given.

There is an au dela to all great interpretative art, something that remains after story, words, picture, and gesture have faded vaguely into that storeroom in our memories where are concealed these lovely ghosts of ephemeral beauty, and the artist who is able to give us this is blessed even beyond his knowledge, for to him has been vouchsafed the sacred kiss of the gods. This quality cannot be acquired, it cannot even be described, but it can be felt. With its beneficent aid the interpreter not only contributes to our pleasure, he broadens our horizon, adds to our knowledge and capacity for feeling.¹

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¹Interpreters and Interpretations, pp. 172-173.

Van Vechten's remaining contribution to drama criticism is perhaps his most characteristic. Always alive to the great moments in art, he is his readers to the performer, the interpreter and the actor, personally and really to an artistic creation. This appreciation of performance as the fulfillment of conception is typical of Van Vechten's attitude towards art. In terms of the social of the time, it may be viewed as a tribute to the concept of "art for art's sake". In the interpretation of any work, Van Vechten is successful, the Twenties, the thirties, the forties, the fifties, the sixties, the seventies, the eighties, the nineties, the present. In the interpretation of any work, Van Vechten is successful, the Twenties, the thirties, the forties, the fifties, the sixties, the seventies, the eighties, the nineties, the present. Olive Thorne and the other performers who graced his eye and ear, he found art in motion, realized and

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There is an air to all great interpretation that something that remains after story, words, picture, and gesture have passed away into that atmosphere in our memories where are conserved these lovely ghosts of ephemeral beauty, and the artist who is able to give us this is blessed even beyond his knowledge, for to him has been vouchsafed the sacred kiss of the gods. This quality cannot be taught, it cannot even be described, but it can be felt. With its recognition and its interpretation not only contributes to our pleasure, we broaden our horizon adds to our knowledge and awakens for feeling.

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lavish in his adulation of great interpretation, but not indiscriminate. He was prepared to be generous in accepting imperfections, but lamented any flaw which prevented a complete creation on the stage. His judgment of performances was consistent with his taste in all art, and in life. If it was wholly alive, striking and memorable in breadth, nuance, and uniqueness, it was a great and cherished experience for Van Wechten.

Contributions to Literature

Fiction in the early decades of the century followed three major trends, each of which reflected the shifting temper of American society. Through a quarter century the public appetite for reform was whetted by the writings of the muckrakers and the literary agents of social consciousness who followed them. The early exploitation of public corruption and scandal by writers whom Theodore Roosevelt supplied with a group epithet cleared a path for novelists to follow. Ida M. Tarbell's 1902 account of the dubious practices of big business, The History of the Standard Oil Company, sounded its echoes in the fictionalized crusades of Upton Sinclair, notably his exposure of the meat-packing industry in The Jungle; the political graft and corruption in positions of civic responsibility revealed in Lincoln

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Steffens' The Shame of the Cities was utilized thematically by Brand Whitlock in The Thirteenth District, by David Graham Phillips in The Master Rogue and The Plum Tree, and the competitive harshness of metropolitan life was explored in the novels of Robert Herrick and Theodore Dreiser.

Ray Stannard Baker's The Railroads on Trial had its counterpart in The Octopus of Frank Norris. Many others turned their literary talent to the indictment of different aspects of American life. The avid socialism of Jack London seeped into his novels of adventure. Sinclair Lewis and others (Van Vechten among them) turned their satire on the stifling provincialism and hypocrisy of Small Town America. Through the Twenties and into the depression years of the Thirties the novel of social protest was kept alive by writers like Dos Passos and Steinbeck to run over into the exposition of world socio-political ideologies in our harrowing mid-century years.

A second later trend, often found in combination but distinguished by its quality of personal introspection, gave literary rebirth to the estranged, disillusioned, highly sensitive individual in fiction. The post-war cynicism of bright young men was channeled into brittle, discouraged sagas of self-seeking. The microcosm of the self, insecure and distrustful of an antagonistic macrocosm, turned in upon itself for reassurance and

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wrote of its vain struggle for balance and fulfillment. Futility had been the fruit of World War I idealism, and the disillusioned intellect of America turned to these chronicles of the defiant individual caught in the tragedy of existence for a vicarious realization of its own mixture of hope and dismay. E. E. Cummings' The Enormous Room, Dos Passos' Three Soldiers, and Hemingway's war-born novels all drew on the scenes of the war itself as the backdrop to the personal tragedy. Others moved the drama closer home, depicting the dispossession of the sensitive soul by his own native environment. Floyd Dell's Moon Calf bewailed the fate of the young man of vague genius struggling in the slough of provincial mediocrity and his own inarticulate superiority. F. Scott Fitzgerald's This Side of Paradise, an amazingly adolescent attempt in the light of its reputation and its author's later accomplishments, might have been just another novel in the genre if it had not played so neatly (and probably unconsciously) into the hands and imaginations of an American public eager to regain the release offered by the easy sophistication of youth, and just as eager to shock itself in the process.

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be viewed as tributaries leading into the sprawling reservoir of Thomas Wolfe, the end product of the type.

Their contribution to our modern literature has been rich and significant. They have given us a philosophy of the individual which has served simultaneously the needs of personal autonomy and sublimated release in our intellectual conscience. They have given us an intimate record of some of the most remarkable personalities we have produced, and have revealed a sensitivity in the American fiber rarely articulated in earlier periods. The curious flaw which blights these novels, discernible in the group more than in any single volume, adds an ironic footnote to their contribution. While they draw their strength from the cold treatment of tragic reality, the warmth of their subjective yearning constitutes a new brand of sentimentality, an excess of self-consciousness, and a jealousy of the pain-and-pleasure intensity in personal experience. They display masochistic satisfaction in beating their sensitive heads against an insensitive wall, and recording all the details of their excruciation. They crowd their pages with so many negative doubts that they sometimes delude themselves through some mystic personal algebra that they have arrived at something positive. And they

be viewed as tributaries leading into the main stream of the reservoir of Thomas Wolfe, the end product of the process. Their contribution to our modern literature has been rich and significant. They have given us a picture of the individual which has served admirably the needs of personal autonomy and individual release in our intellectual experience. They have given us an intimate record of some of the most remarkable personalities we have produced, and have revealed a sensitivity in the American fiber rarely articulated in earlier periods. The curious fact which distinguishes these records is discernible in the group more than in any single volume, adds an ironic footnote to their contribution. While they draw their strength from the cold pressure of tragic reality, the warmth of love and justice remains constitutive a new brand of sentimentalism, an aspect of self-consciousness, and a testimony of love pain and pleasure intensely in personal experience. These literary masochistic satisfaction in getting their sensitive heads against an insensitive wall, and recording all the details of their exertion. They cry out their pages with so many negative dashes that they sometimes delude themselves through some tragic personal vision that they have arrived at some final possibility. And they

are serious, with a seriousness that can never let a moment of pleasure go without its burden of tragic melancholy. Their impact is disturbing, provoking, and deep, so much so as to stand badly in need of either the allegorical molds of a Melville or the relief of the wit and comic sense of a Shakespeare; but the twentieth-century Hamlets were graced with neither.

The third trend in fiction is generally accorded the misleading adjectives light, escapist, or romantic. While each of these accurately designates one aspect of the genre, all three together fail to fully classify the novels of such artists in prose as Van Vechten, Joseph Hergesheimer, James Branch Cabell, and Elinor Wylie. Charming, in the sense of a spell-binding personality, would have to be a fourth adjective, for these writers believed with Van Vechten's Peter Whiffle that "it was the charm of David which had slain the ugly giant, just as charm always kills ugliness."¹ The legacy which they brought to an American fiction devoted to realism and naturalism was the legacy of style, of creative imagination, of the unique personality, of artifice, and of sophisticated prose palatable to the literary gourmet but too over-civilized and precocious a dish for the

¹Carl Van Vechten, Peter Whiffle: His Life and Works (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1922), p. 171.

are serious, with a seriousness that can never be a moment of pleasure or without its burden of responsibility. Their impact is disturbing, provoking, and deep, so much so as to stand badly in need of either the relief of a walk or a walk on the beach or the relief of the wind and sun. sense of a tragedy, but the tragedy is not a tragedy were graced with neither.

The third trend in fiction is generally recognized as the misleading subjectives of the novel. While each of these subjectives is assigned one of the three, all three together tell a story of the novels of such artists in prose as Van Vechten, Johnson, Hergesheimer, James, Francis Cabot, and William Faulkner. Charming, in the sense of a well-ordered personality, would have been a former negative, for these are not believed with Van Vechten's Peter Whitfield that the charm of David which had been the only thing that as charm always kills a person. The legacy which has brought to an American fiction devoted to realism and naturalism was the legacy of style, of creative imagination, of the unique personality, of artistic and sophisticated prose related to the literary form but too over-civilized and provincial a bias for the

¹Carl Van Vechten, Peter Whitfield: His Life and Works (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1927), p. 17.

meat and potatoes reader. This is not to say that the staples were lacking. Robert Frost has said that some writers offer a good deal of dirt with the potato but he prefers his scraped clean. To continue his figure, we can say that these writers served their potato not only clean but cooked with a chef's consummate care. It was still nonetheless a potato.

This care for style flavored the American fiction of the period with the principle of art-for-art's-sake, the Continental overtones of which had never been so widely heard in America before. It balanced with an entertaining flair for whimsy, wit, and fantasy the solemnity and nervous immediacy of the social protests and the sensitive egos in fiction. Even when it commented on society and probed its weaknesses--as it did in all of Van Vechten's and Cabell's novels--it enjoyed itself. These authors intended to be sophisticated and entertaining and they were; but the vitality and wit of their art was sometimes mistaken for mere playfulness and frivolity. Speaking from the viewpoint of the New Masses, Joseph Freeman wrote, "Carl Van Vechten prattles upper-class nonsense for the amusement of our nouveaux riches. James Branch Cabell plagiarizes from a thousand healthy folk fantasies and weaves the results into flashy patterns

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for the same nouveaux riches."¹ Van Vechten, speaking through Campaspe Lorillard, had already established his defence: "How was it possible to read an author who never laughed? For it was only behind laughter that true tragedy could lie concealed, only the ironic author who could awaken the deeper emotions. . . . The only way to get the sense of this absurd, contradictory, and perverse existence into a book was to withdraw entirely from the reality."²

The ability to accept the comic, to court amusement in facing the complications of social existence, was an antiphon to be sung over the insistent themes of tribulation. It was a way of living as well as a way of writing and could be neatly tuned to the fatalistic temper of the times. A lively sense of humor and absurdity, necessarily sophisticated at the intellectual level, was an invaluable antidote to the trials of the Twenties. These writers provided it. At a luncheon given by the Architectural League of Philadelphia, Van Vechten relates, he, Hergesheimer, and Cabell were guests of honor. At the conclusion of the program, a

¹ Joseph Freeman, An American Testament (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1936), p. 380.

² Carl Van Vechten, The Blind Bow-Boy (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1923), p. 160.

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¹ Joseph P. Kamp, *An American Renaissance* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1950), p. 380.

² Carl Van Vechten, *The Blind Man* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1925), p. 100.

member addressing him as "Mr. Cabell" requested a signature in his copy of Jurgen. Van Vechten blithely complied with the request in a large flowing hand, and Cabell completed the fraud by signing the man's copy of Peter Whiffle.¹ As an anecdote, the incident might be told of any novelists of the period, but except for these dealers in the arch phrase and the sophisticated whim it would be inconsistent with the personality and manner of their novels.

Art in a world of hard reality tends to become a servant rather than a master, an adjunct of utilitarian dreams rather than a goal for itself. The fiction of the Twenties, pessimistic and purposeful in its personal dramas and social protests, needed the balance of writers who could provide aesthetic, sophisticated, artful diversion concerned with manner as well as message. Imaginative fashioning, mature play of wit, and artifice, which was in the philosophy of J. K. Huysmans' perfect aesthete, Des Esseintes, "the distinctive mark of genius,"² are literary disciplines which would be sadly lacking in our fiction without the cameo charm of Elinor Wylie's dry-

collated proof.

¹Carl Van Vechten, "How I Remember Joseph Hergesheimer," Yale University Library Gazette, XXII (Jan., 1948), 91.

²J. K. Huysmans, Against the Grain (A Rebours) (New York: Hartsdale House, c. 1931), p. 104.

member addressing him as "Mr. Cabell" requested a signature

in his copy of Jargon. Van Vechten promptly complied

with the request in a large flowing hand, and Cabell

completed the first by signing the name of John

Whiffle.¹ As an anecdote, the incident might be told of

any novelist of the period, but it seems to have occurred

in the same phrase and the sophisticated world it would be

inconsistent with the personality and manner of their

novels.

Art in a world of hard reality seems to possess a

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literary discipline which would be easily lacking in our

fiction without the sense of the writer's style and

control.

¹Carl Van Vechten, "John I. Remondet, John I. Remondet,"

Shelmer, Yale University Library, 1948, p. 10.

(1948), p. 10.

²J. E. Spenser, Against the Grain (New York: Harbinger Press, 1948), p. 10.

polished prose, Joseph Hergesheimer's well-furnished romances, painted as well as written, and James Branch Cabell's sly and wry commentaries on life in Poictesme. One cannot dismiss Cabell as Oscar Cargill has in his discussion of these "exquisites" by labeling him "nothing more than our honest old friend Bill Arp, grown cynical and sophisticated,"¹ without revealing his real significance in an age that bred cynicism, sought sophistication, and lacked the finesse of style and grace in the arts.

Van Vechten, of course, belongs with these artists, but his position rests on a number of innovations that call for separate consideration. His novels, as a recent article has said, "are, in a sense, a documentary study of the Twenties: clever, esoteric, thinly-veiled portraits of the period's leading bohemians."² In this respect they move into the sphere of the novels of social consciousness, although the movement is characteristically light. In addition, they have in common with the novels of the personal intellectual quest the pursuit of a philosophy which could meet the demands of the age. Often vague and implicit, sometimes overt and insistent, it is

¹Oscar Cargill, Intellectual America (New York: Macmillan, 1941), p. 496.

²"Carl Van Vechten," Cue, n. v. (April 9, 1949), p. 19.

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 vague and implicit, sometimes overt and intense, it is

¹ Joseph Conrad, *Imagined Worlds* (New York: Macmillan, 1911), p. 135.
² "Carl van Vechten," *Contemporary Literature*, n. v. (April 1913), p. 19.

a philosophy that curiously welds together modern fatalism with the limited operation of free will. Mabel Dodge Luhan has expressed the former in the recollection of her "only philosophy in those days": "Let It happen. Let It decide. Let the great force behind the scenes direct the action. Have faith in life and do not hamper it or try to shape it."¹ The last statement Van Vechten came to alter slightly. For him, as for much of his social milieu, pattern was a key word to life and art. Conventionally it might be conformity and regularity, but to him it was the antithesis. The object was to snatch pleasure wherever it could be found, and the individual could not only passively observe such patterns of pleasure, but could actively direct contrasting elements into amusing, diverting, and incongruous patterns.

For his novels, he selected the patterns of a number of popular subjects in contemporary fiction; Peter Whiffle capitalized on the post-war vogue of Continental settings, The Tattooed Countess fell in with the revolt from the village, Nigger Heaven celebrated the growing interest in Harlem life, Spider Boy lampooned Hollywood, a popular pastime in 1928, and Parties took

¹Mabel Dodge Luhan, Movers and Shakers (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1936), p. 80.

a philosophy that originally arises from a
fatalism with the limitation of the individual.
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Peter White crystallized on the post-war scene of
Continental setting. The unknown unknown unknown unknown
the revolt from the village, higher higher higher higher
growing interest in human life, higher higher higher higher
Hollywood, a popular picture in 1931, and various look

¹ James G. Thompson, Novels and Stories (New York:
Harcourt, Brace, 1936), p. 80.

stock of a decade which, at its conclusion, was given to looking on itself with a mixture of bewildered pride and grave misgivings. But each of these novels was singular within its type for the grotesque and ironic incongruities which served as the basis for both their diverting vitality and their thematic impact.

In his role of critic and essayist, Van Vechten brought a strange exotic flavor to literary taste in the United States, as well as giving his readers an indication of the eclectic background for his own fictions. Himself "guiltless of any ambition to be the great American novelist,"¹ he rarely commented on others who might demand similar titles.

It is doubtless my limitation that the lesser figures in art have always succeeded in arousing my interest to a higher degree than the greater figures. I am quite willing to subscribe to the superior genius of Beethoven and Milton, but I prefer to listen to Scarlatti and to read the slighter works of Thomas Love Peacock. It is the odd, the charming, the glamorous, often the old-fashioned volume which has the compelling power with me.²

Only partially an exception to this was his enthusiasm for the later work of Herman Melville in 1921, at which date other early Melville revivalists had discarded the

¹Emily Clark, Innocence Abroad (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1931), p. 143.

²Carl Van Vechten, Excavations (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1926), p. 25.

stock of a decade which, at its completion, was often looking on itself with a mixture of surprised pride and grave misgivings. But each of these novels was situated within its type for the grasping and ironic individual which served as the basis for each novel's living idealism and their thematic interest.

In his role of critic and essayist, Van Veeteren brought a strange exotic flavor to literary taste in the United States, as well as giving the general impression of the eclectic background for his own fiction. "Guiltless of any ambition to be the great American novelist,"¹ he rarely commented on others who might demand similar titles.

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Only partially an exception to this was his organization for the later work of German scholars in 1921, at which date other early revivalists had disappeared.

¹ Emily Clark, Immortal Novel (New York, 1921), p. 13.

² Carl Van Veeteren, Excursions (New York, 1925), p. 25.

work which followed Moby Dick as mysterious and tragic failures worth alluding to only as disappointing and anti-climactic addenda.

Van Vechten's other advocacies, most of which were collected in the volume smartly titled Excavations, fit the pattern more neatly. Edgar Saltus, that strange shadow in earlier American bohemia dedicated to "style, style polished, style repolished" in the sensational pagan volumes which his wife reported were never written "less than three times,"¹ was one. Another was the antique Philip Thicknesse, a spirited eighteenth-century adventurer who recorded his fabulous affairs with a charming frankness and dash. Most flamboyant of all, perhaps, was Ronald Firbank, the English eccentric with a bird of paradise prose that crackled with electric sparks and confounded with bewildering indirection. Van Vechten single-handedly presided over the American introduction of this writer to a public in whose favor he is still growing. Others appreciatively essayed round out a perversely attractive assortment of forgotten or neglected stylists: the Continental Louise de la Ramée who wrote of romantic recklessness as Ouida, Henry Blake Fuller, the sympathetic cosmopolitan tragically tied to Chicago,

¹Fred Lewis Pattee, The New American Literature 1890-1930 (New York: The Century Company, 1930), p. 229.

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¹ Fred Lewis Pattee, *The New American Literature*
1890-1930 (New York: The Century Company, 1930), p. 259.

the mystic Arthur Machen, who has gained overdue recognition due largely to his resurrection at the hands of Van Vechten, and the amazing M. P. Shiel, concocter of scientific fantasies and bold utopias. The list must be extended to many not included in Excavations to be complete,¹ but these amply represent the peculiar flavor of Van Vechten's advocacies in literature while indicating the discrimination which, except perhaps for the unguarded enthusiasm extended to Saltus, presided over his choices.

One more service as middleman between writer and public must be noted. In 1912 Van Vechten met Gertrude Stein in Paris. Miss Stein's companion, Alice B. Toklas, has recorded in brief the significance of this meeting. "It was on all sides love at first sight and the beginning of a long rare friendship, indescribable loyalty on his side, complete dependence on G. S.'s."² Van Vechten has served practically as Gertrude Stein's agent ever since, and has borne much of the responsibility of getting her work before the public first and in their hearts afterward. As her literary executor, he has

¹A complete and more detailed discussion will be found in Chapter III, pp. 90-105.

²Alice B. Toklas, "They Who Came to Paris to Write," New York Times Book Review (Aug. 6, 1950), p. 1.

the mystic Arthur Schopenhauer, who has gained ever-increasing
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Van Vechten, and the resulting "The Great Gatsby" is a
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Biographical Background of His Work

Van Vechten's first book was published when he was thirty-five, but the years which preceded its appearance had been active and adventurous. Many of the essays in his last book, Sacred and Profane Memories (1932), are reminiscences of these earlier years, and one of them, "Notes for an Autobiography," sketches in six pages some significant details of his personal history up to 1923.

Carl Van Vechten was born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, on June 17, 1880. His family, an attractive and respected part of the community, offered a more substantial environment for a son who "cannot remember the time when he was not trying to write" than one might picture in nineteenth-century Cedar Rapids. Van Vechten recalls that "The Woman's Journal always lay on our sitting-room table, along with Harper's Weekly and the Atlantic Monthly."¹ His mother, who had known Lucy Stone in college, was an early champion of women's suffrage and an occasional force for the improvement of taste and cultural facilities in her sphere--"She was also responsible for the

¹Carl Van Vechten, Sacred and Profane Memories (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1932), p. 11.

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¹Carl Van Vechten, Search and Seizure (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1932), p. 11.

public library in our town."¹ His father had been a subscriber to the Atlantic Monthly since its first issue, and once helped an Iowa friend found a school for Negroes in Mississippi.²

One of Van Vechten's most charming essays, "The Tin Trunk" in Sacred and Profane Memories, utilizes a box of mementoes to touch off reflections of the author's family and personal life in Cedar Rapids. The memories are set down with the grace, the sentiment, and the calm poignancy that only time and distance can inspire. The essay pictures in daguerrotype tones his boyhood scenes, and many of the details blend neatly and comfortably with the later career of the writer and with his books. What is missing, however, is the author's own restlessness, that claustrophobia of the spirit that demanded expansion, experiment, and esoteric experience instead of routine comfort and provincial conformity. Many of the memories that return most pleasantly are those which led away from Cedar Rapids.

Music was a part of the family. Carl, his mother, and his sister Emma, whom he remembers as "an excellent

¹Ibid., p. 12.

²The school is at Piney Woods, Mississippi. Laurence Jones, the Negro from Marshalltown, Iowa, is still its director.

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¹Ibid., p. 12.

²The school is at Elmer, Iowa, Mississippi.
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pianist," all played their old Gilbert square rosewood grand, and his brother Ralph (eighteen years his senior-- Carl was the youngest of the three) is pictured as "a thin serious-looking boy in his youth who passed his spare time in practicing the violin and in printing."¹ Books take their place in these memories, beginning with J. T. Trowbridge and Horatio Alger Jr. and moving through Dickens, Richard Harding Davis, Mark Twain, Shakespeare, and Ibsen, eventually including What Maisie Knew, Daudet's Sapho, and two books that "made an indelible impression" on him: The Confessions of a Young Man and Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant. Van Vechten's interest in the theatre grasped any part of it which filtered through to Iowa. "One of my earliest memories," he has written elsewhere, "is connected with an amateur production of The Sorcerer [the Gilbert and Sullivan opera] at Greene's Opera House, Cedar Rapids, Iowa. I could not have been more than seven or eight years old."² Other shows which played Cedar Rapids on tour were a part of his fare, while pictures and posters of theatrical artists comprised one of his earliest collections.

¹Ibid., p. 6.

²In the Garret, p. 196n.

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 J. T. Trowbridge and Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, through
 Dickens, Richard Harding Davis, and Twain, Shakespeare,
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 Cedar Rapids on tour were a part of his life, while
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¹Ibid., p. 6.

²In the Farset, p. 150.

When Van Vechten left his Iowa home for the newly endowed University of Chicago, Cedar Rapids slipped quickly into the background. The move signalled his release from provincialism and his initiation into the first degree of cosmopolitanism. New York and Europe, especially and ultimately Paris, were easy, almost predestined steps after Chicago. But Iowa never quite left Van Vechten. The man is too genuinely cosmopolitan by nature and inclination to be spoken of as transplanted from midwestern soil to the common earth of Western culture. And such a figure of speech is too heavy and dramatic for a growth which came naturally, almost inevitably. But there is the best stamp of America on his life and work; however widely he roams, however Gallic, British, or individual are his overtones, the American is still in him. The process was one of cross-fertilization rather than transplanting; the result is more a fleur-de-lis grafted on an Iowa cornstalk (such a combination would serve Van Vechten's taste for strange contrasts and novel assortments) than any series of single plants.¹

¹The emblematic decoration on the cover and title page of Sacred and Profane Memories, indeed, can be seen as representing such a union--sheaves of corn bound below the middle, flaring out a bit at the base with cascading arms bending down from above.

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 page of Sacred and Profane America, indeed, can be seen
 as representing such a union—flowers of corn come below
 the middle, flaring out a bit at the base with cascading
 arms bending down from above.

A number of essays attest to his later fondness for the years in Iowa, and The Tattooed Countess offsets its satire of the smallness and hypocrisy of Maple Valley, Iowa, with a genuine feeling for the innate charm and color of the locale. Mabel Dodge Luhan, writing of her early acquaintance with Van Vechten, comments on this affection which could be realized only when he was assured of his escape. "Everything that took Carl farther away from Cedar Rapids was desirable to him at that time, though later he became conscious of his inextinguishable love for it, and for old brick houses set in lawns, with rep-covered furniture and square pianos in them, and he capitulated and reproduced such a room in his apartment."¹

In Chicago all three of Van Vechten's professional careers as music critic, novelist, and, after 1932, photographer, were nurtured. As a student at the University of Chicago, Van Vechten specialized in English under Robert Morss Lovett (who remained a good friend and whom Van Vechten refers to as "the best teacher I ever had"), William Vaughn Moody, and Robert Herrick, the novelist. He wrote for campus publications and poured his energies into college themes, the latter now secured in the New York Public Library to be withheld

¹Movers and Shakers, p. 79.

A number of essays were written by him for the years in Iowa, and the University of Iowa its native of the sweetness and sympathy of his life, with a genuine feeling for the human character and color of the locale. Abel Joseph, writing of his early acquaintance with Van Vechten, comments on this affection which could be realized only when he was away from Cedar Rapids was restricted to his intellectual though later he became conscious of his intellectual love for it, and for old friends whom he met in Iowa, with rep-covered furniture and square tables in the room, and he capitulated and reproduced such a room in his apartment. In Chicago all three of Van Vechten's professional careers as music critic, novelist, and, after 1925, photographer, were nurtured. As a student at the University of Chicago, Van Vechten associated in 1914 with under Robert Morris Lovett (who remained a good friend and whom Van Vechten refers to as "the best teacher I ever had"), William Vroman Moody, and Robert Herrick, the novelist. He wrote for campus publications and poured his energies into college work, the latter not secured in the New York Public Library to be withheld.

during their author's lifetime. Several of these themes, it has been revealed, deal with Negroes, a subject which has held Van Vechten's interest and enthusiasm throughout his life.¹

Music remained an active hobby during the seven years spent in Chicago. As a performer, he participated in duet sessions with other pianists or with violinists; as a listener, he gained an orchestral education from Theodore Thomas and the Chicago Symphony, an organization notable for the introduction of new music into its concert programs, a practice generally avoided by conductors of that time.

Upon receiving his Ph.B. degree, Van Vechten stayed in Chicago as a reporter for Hearst's Chicago American. He wrote little for the newspaper, however, his assignments being the spot coverage of news stories which he telephoned in to the rewrite desk. Before his departure from the American, his duties had been largely changed to collecting photographs from subjects in the news. Van Vechten was so satisfactory at this that he was kept at it almost exclusively. But Chicago was merely the necessary limbo between Cedar Rapids and

¹"Carl Van Vechten's Gallery of Negro Notables," Negro Digest, V (Dec., 1946), 54.

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¹Carl Van Vechten's "Letter to Negro Writers,"
Negro Digest, V (Dec., 1935), 24.

New York. After seven years of education, both formal and informal, Van Vechten moved on to the city with which, together with Paris, his name will always be associated.

New York accepted him well and established him quickly in the first of his three professions. He sold a paper to Theodore Dreiser's Broadway Magazine on the opera Salome, and shortly thereafter was hired by the New York Times as assistant to its venerable music critic, Richard Aldrich. By 1907, Van Vechten had satisfied two major ambitions. He was a citizen of the sophisticated society of New York, far removed from the previous provincialism of Cedar Rapids, and he was a successful writer, a music critic and a contributor to the cosmopolitan journals of his day.

From that time on, the record is crowded with activity and accomplishment. His association with the Times as critic was long and fruitful, including a year's service as Paris correspondent for that newspaper. Travel abroad satisfied a thirst for new experience and a further retreat from Philistia. In 1913 he became drama critic for a short stay with the New York Press. A year later he was again abroad, caught in the hectic opening scenes of the war in Europe. Jobless in 1915, he put

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Richard Aldrich. By 1897, Van Vleet had written two
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critic for a short stay with the New York Times. A year
later he was again abroad, and in the next several
seasons of the war in Europe. Between 1895 and 1900

together the manuscript of his first book, Music After the Great War. He continued thereafter to engage himself in the production of books of critical essays, books about cats, and his seven novels until 1932 when he turned from the profession of writer to the profession of photographer. During the seventeen-year period, a total of nineteen volumes appeared under his name. Together with twenty-one prefaces and papers for other books, the editing of the cat tales in Lords of the Housetops, and consistent contributions to periodicals such as The Smart Set, Vogue, and The Reviewer, the list displays a prodigious literary output which is only partly explained by the fact that some of his volumes were compiled from earlier essays first published separately.¹

Such an outline of activity can barely suggest the varied experience, friendships, and color, the hectic and vigorous living that Van Vechten crowded into the years between the First World War and the Great Depression. His early participation in the salon groups of

¹A good deal of editing and rewriting went into the preparation of the essays being collected in book form. In a letter to Van Vechten on December 30, 1924, James Branch Cabell, always a demanding critic of style, wrote of his pleasure with Red: "Your musical themes did not in this at all deter me, because I approached each paper, through a comparison with its earlier form, as an example of rewriting. . . . And all through, from my especial standpoint, I was applauding you. Your sentences become steadily more delightful."

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in the production of books of critical essays, books
about arts, and his seven novels until 1932 when he turned
from the profession of writer to the profession of
photographer. During the seven-year period, a total
of nineteen volumes appeared under his name. Together
with twenty-one prefaces and papers for other books, the
editing of the last takes in the English, and
consistent contributions to periodicals such as the
Art, Vogue, and the Reviewer, the last of these prod-
igious literary output which is only partly explained
by the fact that some of his volumes were compiled from
earlier essays first published separately.
Such an outline of activity too brief to suggest
the varied experience, friendship, and color, the habits
and vigorous living that Van Vechten showed into the
years between the first World War and the Great Depres-
sion. His early participation in the salubrious

A good deal of editing and rewriting went into
the preparation of the essays which collected in book
form. In a letter to Van Vechten on October 20, 1932,
James Branch Cabell, always a demanding critic of style,
wrote of his pleasure with the English: "John Auden's remark
not in this at all better me, because I approached each
paper, through a comparison with the earlier form, as an
example of rewriting. . . and all know, from my
special standpoint, I was enjoying you. I am reassured
become steadily more delightful."

Mabel Dodge, his amazingly extensive association and friendship with all manner of celebrities, notables, and eccentrics both here and abroad, and, after his marriage to the Russian actress, Fania Marinoff, his own fabulous reputation as a genial, imaginative host drawing to the Van Vechten apartments the high and the low, the exotic and the plain, the dark and the light, the intellectual and the emotional representatives of literature, society, and the arts, qualify him as a participant in the Circus Maximus of the Twenties worthy of star billing. And the beat of this gregarious commentator, whom so many of his contemporaries besides Emily Clark have "never ceased to consider one of the most diverting personalities in existence,"¹ extended from the main tent to the side-shows.

¹Emily Clark, Innocence Abroad, p. 132.

Mabel Dodge, his amazingly extensive association and
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and the arts, quickly win a pre-eminence in the minds
Maxims of the twenties worthy of star billing. And the
best of this generous comment, when so many of
his contemporaries besides Emily Clark have "never been
to consider one of the most diverting personalities
in existence,"¹ extended from the east to the west-
shows.

¹Emily Clark, Innocence Abroad, p. 121.

CHAPTER II

MUSIC

For a country which has a book of songs¹ as the first volume printed on its shores, America has been tardy in bringing music to maturity in its national culture. Until the post-Civil War years, when the nation turned with sophomore enthusiasm to cultural occasions and organizations, music, except in its folk traditions, was the rare luxury of the initiated few. By 1880, however, there was evidence that the American musician and his public intended to make up for lost time. The rising popularity of grand opera shifted the scene of musical activity gradually from Boston, long its American home, to New York. In the twenty years that closed the century, the list of musical organizations and occasions multiplied rapidly and widely, bringing music not only to the established society of the east coast, but also to the burgeoning cultures which sent out their roots from Chicago, Cincinnati, and other growing centers of the midwest.

¹The Bay Psalm Book (1640). Music in two parts was added in 1690.

For a country which has a school of music, as the first volume printed on its shores, America has been tardy in bringing music to maturity in its national culture. Until the post-Civil War years, when the nation turned with spontaneous enthusiasm to cultural activities and organizations, music, except in the folk traditions, was the rare luxury of the cultured few. In 1880, however, there was evidence that the American musician and his public intended to make up for lost time. The rising popularity of grand opera witnessed the scene of musical activity gradually from Boston, and the American home, to New York. In the twenty years that closed the century, the list of musical organizations and societies multiplied rapidly and widely, bringing music not only to the established society of the east coast, but also to the burgeoning cultures of the west and their roots from Chicago, Cincinnati, and other growing centers of the Midwest.

¹The Bay Psalm Book (1693). Translated in two parts was added in 1695.

Place in American Music History

In the opening decades of the twentieth century, America, having lately become familiar with three centuries of European music, rested easily for a while on that familiarity. The performers and the public combined to make music as much a commodity of culture as an aesthetic experience in art. The listener, aware in his limited experience only of popular themes from the masters, required the audition of nothing more to satisfy his musical taste. The performer, aware of this unimaginative satisfaction, catered to it, partly because he had to depend on the support of his audience, and often because his own worship of the enshrined masters overbalanced any natural need he may have felt for novelty or variety. Such a situation was not stagnant, for the extended musical activity was still educating a nation in the art, but it was static, reducible in the business culture of America to one more cultural item of stock in trade. The popular conception of music, brought down to terms of the provincialism with which the Twenties were to break, was illustrated by the fate of German music during the First World War. Some symphony orchestras would play none. The Metropolitan Opera banned Wagner. Others yielded to public demand and de-emphasized the role of

30

Place in American Music History

In the opening decades of the twentieth century America, having lately become familiar with the tunes of European music, was naturally on a whole not familiar. The performer and the audience combined to make music as much a commodity of utility as an aesthetic experience in art. The musician, aware of his limited experience only of popular tunes from the past, required the addition of nothing more to satisfy his musical taste. The performer, aware of this musical indifference, entered to it, hardly because he had to depend on the support of his audience, and often because his own worship of the enshrined masters overwhelmed any natural need he may have felt for novelty or variety. Such a situation was not stagnant, for the expansion of musical activity was still extending a nation in the art but it was static, reducible in the cultural culture of America to one more cultural item of value in trade. The popular conception of music, brought down to date of the provincialism with which the frontier was so break, was illustrated by the case of German music during the First World War. Some symphony orchestras would play none. The Metropolitan Opera banned Wagner. Others yielded to public demand and de-emphasized the role of

German compositions in their concerts, the taboo being extended to musicians with German names as well. A comparison of this with our conduct during World War II, when we continued to call hamburgers hamburgers and when we listened to Mendelssohn and Wagner without being tormented by delusions of subversion, indicates to some extent what we owe the forces of sophistication and sanity at work between the two wars. The music criticism of Carl Van Vechten is clearly one of these forces. Beginning in the years when musical America was content to let its engine die while gazing through the rear view mirror to admire what it had already seen, his essays directed attention to the road ahead. From the publication of his first collection in 1915, already talking of Music After the Great War, until the last volume, Red ("Red is the colour of youth. Oxen and turkeys are always enraged when they see it"¹), in 1925, his writing urged that the art of music was in motion, and that the present and future tenses deserved a place in its discussion.

Critical Creed and Method

Anatole France spoke of criticism as the adventures of the soul among masterpieces. As a definition

¹The quotation, which serves as the inscription, is from Robert Schumann.

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Critical Creed and Method

Anatole France spoke of criticism as the advan-
ces of the soul among masterpieces. As a definition

¹The quotation, which serves as the introduction,
is from Robert Schumann.

his statement leaves much to be desired. The adventures of the critic involve the mind and the personality as well as the soul. Sometimes, the soul failing to be reached (for criticism must deal with much art which does not--perhaps isn't meant to--qualify as a masterpiece), the individuality and wit of the critic are sufficient in themselves. These are the qualities which the critic must use to express himself and to reach others through the medium in which he works: literature. Criticism, despite academic dreams of objectivity, can not be disembodied judgment, and the general reader should be thankful. As Peter Whiffle, speaking for his author, says, "We read the old critics to find out about the critics, not about the subjects on which they are writing. Consequently, it is only the critics who have been interesting personalities who are read through many generations."¹ The generalization may be a dangerous one to leave unqualified, but it holds more truth than error. The critic of any art cannot isolate his subject from either life or himself without narrowing the province of that art and diluting the strength of his own contribution to it. Paul Henry Lang has expressed the same thing in another way: "The true critic interprets life

¹Carl Van Vechten, Peter Whiffle, p. 187.

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the critic must use to express himself and to express
others through the medium in which he works. The
criticism, despite academic criticism, should be
not be disembodied judgment, and the general reader
should be thankful. As Peter Diller, speaking for his
author, says, "He reads the old critics to find out about
the critics, not about the subjects on which they are
writing. Consequently, it is only the critics who have
been interesting personalities who are remembered and
generations." The generalization may be dangerous
one to leave unqualified, but it holds some truth
error. The critic of any age cannot isolate his subject
from either life or himself without impoverishing the province
of that art and blunting the sharpness of his own criticism.
Diction to it. Paul Henry Berg has expressed the same
thing in another way: "The first critic is interested in life

¹ Carl Van Vechten, *Peter Diller*, p. 107.

and its aims, and yet he speaks of music, books, or paintings as if they were the mere ornaments of life. It is this ironical circumstance which gives the great critics' writings that wisdom, humor, and force that is so strong that it must not be mentioned, for he who does not notice it will not discern the irony even if underscored."¹ In matter such a critic would command breadth of knowledge and experience; in manner he would present his own voice and personality, for the art and the life discussed in his writing are the art he knows and the life he observes. James Huneker, the American music critic who most nearly filled this design, also came closest to expressing the attributes of the ideal:

There must be standards, but the two greatest are sympathy and its half-sister, sincerity. . . . The happy mean between swashbuckling criticism and the pompous academic attitude, dull but dignified, seems difficult of attainment. But it exists. To use the personal pronoun in criticism doesn't always mean "subjectivity." I don't believe in schools, movements, or schematologies, or any one method of seeing and writing. Be charitable, be broad--in a word, be cosmopolitan. He is a hobby of mine, this citizen of the world. A novelist may be provincial, parochial as the town pump, that is his picture; but a critic must not be narrow in his outlook on the world. He need not be so catholic as to admire both Cezanne and Cabanel, for they are mutually exclusive, but he should be cosmopolitan

¹Paul Henry Lang, "The Equipment of the Musical Journalist," *Music and Criticism*, Richard F. French, ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948), p. 141.

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and the happy mean between self-sacrifice and self-interest
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To use the personal pronoun in criticism does not
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mine, this citizen of the world. A novelist may be
provincial, parochial as the poet says, but the critic
picture; but a critic must not be narrow in his
outlook on the world. He need not be an eclectic
as to admire both Casanova and Gansel, for they are
mutually exclusive, and he should be cosmopolitan.

¹Paul Henry Lane, "The Argument of the Musical
Journalist," *Musical and Critical Essays*, London, 1911.
(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1911), p. 141.

in his sympathies, else his standards are insufficient. The truth is, criticism is a full-sized man's job.¹

The precedent for such music criticism was not lacking in 1915. Huneke had been writing for years, and his audience was large.² Lawrence Gilman's two volumes of essays on modern music had presented opinion and fact in the cosmopolitan tone of cultured conversation. After the close of the century, the music essays appearing as program notes for concerts gave impetus to this type of criticism, with Philip Hale's admirable work for the Boston Symphony setting the pace.

The animation and style of Van Vechten's writing, together with his desire to broaden musical horizons in America, make him, if not a charter member of the group, at least an illustrious and early initiate. He was perhaps more impudent, more wilfully shocking in his

¹ James Gibbons Huneke, Steeplejack (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928), Part III, pp. 123-124.

² Oscar Thompson in Practical Musical Criticism (New York: Witmark Educational Publications, 1934), p. 149, records that, "for a time he was read in the hinterland as possibly no other New York critic ever had been read." H. L. Mencken, in the appreciative essay in A Book of Prefaces (New York: Garden City, 1927), pp. 178-179, remarks, "There is no stooping in his discourse; he frankly addresses himself to an audience that has gone through the forms, and so he avoids the tediousness of the ABC expositors. He is the only American musical critic, save Van Vechten, who thus assumes invariably that a musical audience exists."

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criticism, with Philip Barlow's admirable work for the
Boston Symphony setting the pace.

The animation and style of Van Vechten's writing,
together with his desire to create a critical movement
in America, made him, if not a central member of the
group, at least an indispensable and early participant. It
was perhaps more important, more influential in his

¹ James Gibbons Huneker, *Musician's Music* (New York:
Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923), pp. 117-124.

² *Gasser's Symphony* by Frederick Motz (New York:
New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1931),
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critic, save Van Vechten, who can assume invariably that
a musical audience exists."

individuality, but his was the era of intellectual revolt against traditional standards. The license for his disregard of tradition came from a society finally ready to break with its provincial past. He opened fire on such forts of established criticism as H. T. Finck and Henry E. Krehbiel whenever he found them entrenched in the orderly confines of tradition. His frontal attack while defending Gustav Mahler's new instrumentation for certain masterworks in the face of Krehbiel's charges of blasphemy for tampering with the classics is a memorable example.¹ He attempted to remove the blinkers which had kept America's recognition of good music so limited and "safe." Through the appeal of his writing he attempted to share the breadth as well as the depth in music. It was vitally alive to him and it remained alive in his prose. What he wrote of music was outspoken in opinion, but accurate in fact. Above all, it was a sincere and readable statement of its writer's own taste and personality. It ranged from a whimsical, jolly lampoon of contemporary American composers, utilizing quotations from a fugitive book which seriously catalogued small-town amateurs (obviously with an eye on sales to persons

¹In the Garret, pp. 209-212.

individuality, but his was the one of intellectual revolt
against traditional standards. The issue for the dis-
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contemporary American composers, utilizing quotations
from a fugitive book which certainly contained a little
town masters (occasionally with an eye on sales to persons

¹ In the Garnet, pp. 250-251.

mentioned and their friends)¹, to an impressive demonstration of first-hand knowledge, extensive research, thorough inquiry, and considered judgment brought to bear in an essay on the Armide of Gluck.² If it often lacked what can be called "substance," it lacked it purposely, for it was meant to be read. In the essay called "Why Music Is Unpopular," Van Vechten catalogued the sins of traditional music criticism and asserted his own creed.³ He indicted the types of critics who (1) fall upon quoting the poets to illustrate musical effects, and (2) hold academic sobriety and dry, pedantic purpose to their work, suggesting that such methods do more to harm music, by making it seem either precious or boring, than they do to help it. Music criticism could be both definitive (The Music of Spain) and provocative (the essays on interpreters, staging techniques, new composers, and the dance) in the books of Van Vechten without sacrificing either writer or reader. His motive was simple and sensible: "Let more think about music; to make that

¹Carl Van Vechten, "The Authoritative Work on American Music," The Merry-Go-Round (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1918), pp. 197-212.

²Carl Van Vechten, "Notes on the Armide of Gluck," Interpreters and Interpretations, pp. 223-240.

³Interpreters and Interpretations, pp. 357-368.

mentioned and their interest¹ to an extensive domain
specimen of first-hand knowledge, extensive knowledge,
thorough inquiry, and considered judgment proper to be
in an essay on the Art of Music. It is often asked
what can be called "musicalness," it is asked in passing,
for it was meant to be used in the essay called "Why
Music is Unpopular," Van Veenen catalogued the state of
traditional music criticism and answered his own question.
He indicated the types of critics who fall into three
the poets to illustrate musical effects, and (2) hold
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(The Music of Russia) and provocative (and serious)
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dance) in the book of Van Veenen without sacrificing
either writer or reader. His motive was simple and
sensible: "Let more than one mind be made of it."

¹Carl Van Veenen, "The Authoritative Work on
American Music," The New York Times, New York, N. Y.,
Knopf, 1918, pp. 197-212.

²Carl Van Veenen, "Notes on the Music of Russia,"
Interpreters and Interpretations, pp. 229-243.

³Interpreters and Interpretations, pp. 251-263.

possible curiosity must be stimulated, so that there may be a more general desire to hear music."¹ His essays followed that aim.

In another respect, the criticism of Van Vechten followed the example of James Gibbons Huneker. In its cosmopolitan outlook, it observed the correlation of the arts. As couriers of curiosity and culture, they both found music the most beguiling of the arts, but they were unwilling to court her to the exclusion of her attractive sisters. Consistent with the true critic's need for breadth, they were at home with any aesthetic experience or artistic subject. Van Vechten, who "was always greatly concerned with the production of his books--in fact he designed most of them himself,"² brought his familiarity with literature, painting, dancing, and the theatre to bear on his discussion of music, and in many instances devoted whole essays to one or another of these interests. In addition, his taste for decoration, scene, color, and chiarascuro consistently entered his essays. To most of America

¹Ibid., p. 367.

²Alfred A. Knopf, "Reminiscences of Hergesheimer, Van Vechten, and Mencken," Yale University Library Gazette, XXIV (April, 1950), 151.

possible curiosity was not satisfied, so that there was
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¹ Ibid., p. 367.

² Alfred A. Knopf, "Hunekerism," *Van Vechten, and Knopf, The University Library*
Gazette, XXIV (April, 1950), 151.

such freedom of reference was strange and suspect.

"Persons who hear painting, see music, touch poems, taste symphonies, and write perfumes," wrote Huneker in comfortable self-defence, "are now classed by the psychical police as decadent, though such notions are as old as art and literature."¹ "Decadence," one reflects, has somehow always been a bad word in English, even when translated faithfully from the Latin or French.

With Van Vechten there was a more immediate basis for relating the arts in discussion: they were illustrative of elements inseparably inherent in music. "What most critics have forgotten is that in Music matter, form, and idea are one," he urged. "In painting, in poetry, the idea, the words, the form, may be separated; each may play its part, but in music there is no idea without form, no form without idea."² In another essay, "Variations on a Theme by Havelock Ellis,"³ he approaches the relation of literature, painting, and music as media of expression. Ellis had suggested that painters were excellent writers, musicians poor. Although

¹James Gibbons Huneker, Bedouins (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920), p. 82.

²The Merry-Go-Round, p. 34.

³In the Garret, pp. 11-39.

such freedom of reference was obvious and respect-
 "Persons who have painting, see music, toward music, these
 symphonies, and other phenomena," wrote Huxley in
 comfortable self-helms, "and are almost by the way, col-
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 painters were excellent writers, musicians good, although

¹ James Gibson Huxley, *Before the Dawn* (New York:
 Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920), p. 82.
² *The Henry-Go-Round*, p. 24.
³ *In the Garret*, pp. 11-12.

he mentions some significant exceptions, Van Vechten agrees; but he goes on to explain the importance to writers and painters of experience outside oneself, while the art of the musician need not be so encumbered. Conversely, words are an encumbrance to the musician, while to the painter and the writer, both accustomed to composing as an "eye," they are fluid and serviceable. The value of a working familiarity with the art of the painter and the writer for a critic of music is patent in this observation. In practice, it can be illustrated by the perception and feeling carried in one sentence from an essay on Waslav Nijinsky: "His dancing has the unbroken quality of music, the balance of great painting, the meaning of fine literature, and the emotion inherent in all these arts."¹

Van Vechten grew steadily more discursive through his career as a music critic, developing an easy, rambling, personal sort of discourse which disarms the seeker of more solid (or stolid) fare before it has the chance to discourage him. If his first volume had been a bit self-conscious and tight (although not by ordinary standards), his second collection, Music and Bad Manners, assumed the familiar, anecdotal, whimsical style that

¹Interpreters and Interpretations, p. 161.

was to remain in the ascendancy from then on. For all their diversity and even occasional perversity, however, the essays remained direct in their effects. Van Vechten ignored the customary half-protection of hedging. His convictions were never watered: "If every time I expressed a personal feeling (and all my feelings and tastes are intensely personal) I followed with something like this, 'it seems to me,' or 'this may or may not be true,' or 'according to my taste,' or 'Mr. Thing does not agree with me,' my utterances would lose whatever force or charm they possess and they would be so clogged with extraneous qualifications that no one would read them."¹ This is the explanation of his reputation for brashness and impetuous whim. The basic formula for his critical judgment he declared even more simply: "Imitative work is always bad. Music that tries to be something that something else has been may be thrown aside as worthless."²

Criticism of and Contributions to Opera

From the 1890's on, opera had flourished in New York and in America. It had been a noteworthy part of America's musical activity through much of the nineteenth century, but in the first two decades of this century

¹Ibid., p. 364.

²The Merry-Go-Round, p. 33.

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convictions were never stated. If every line
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"it seems to me, or this may be a part of time," or
"according to my taste," or "I am doing now and then"
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extensive qualifications that no one would read them.
This is the explanation of the reputation for
and important work. The result is for the critical
judgment he declined even more. The result is
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Orchestra of and Orchestra to O. and

From the 1890's on, O. and Orchestra in New
York and in America. It has been a necessary part of
America's musical activity and has been the main
century, but in the first two decades of this century.

¹ Ibid., p. 50.

² The Merry-Go-Round, p. 5.

opera fed the public's appetite for glamor and celebrity as well as for artistic entertainment. Radio was not yet born, and motion pictures were in their awkward childhood; opera and opera stars provided the entertainment and glitter that these mass media were soon to usurp. The stars of opera were familiar to all classes, from the sophisticated devotee to the adolescents of the hinterlands who never expected to attend a performance. This broad appeal and the social importance attached to the patronage of opera assured its popularity and support, but, at the same time, allowed producers and performers to concentrate their efforts on providing glamor and social occasion to the general neglect of artistic improvement. As a result, the public was on hand, but they displayed no taste; impresarios and producers had only to present opera and opera stars to satisfy their paying public. If the performers were sufficiently colorful and the occasion sufficiently patronized by the cultured and elite, little else was required.

The task of a critic under these circumstances was to applaud whatever excellence could be found in opera and to encourage innovations and imagination which would make the offerings even more satisfying as both art and entertainment, for, to some extent, the producers of

opera as well as the audience had to be educated. To Van Vechten the solution was plain: whatever had life, personality, and artistic imagination was good; whatever lacked these qualities was poor. He found the interpreters, the performing stars, chiefly in the first category, the unimaginative stage productions through which they moved in the second. He welcomed the change in the emphasis of the singer from bel canto, the flamboyant perfection of vocal tone and technique, to expressive, interpretive singing consistent with the dramatic role. "The new art of the singer," he wrote in the essay of that name, "should develop to the highest degree the significance of the text."¹ He could cite Mary Garden in this respect as the most able exponent. The volume of essays devoted to interpreters and interpretations admirably evoked the art of such singing actors and actresses as Feodor Chaliapine, Olive Fremstad, Mariette Mazarin, Geraldine Farrar, and Miss Garden, fully appreciating the personality each carried into an operatic role, while recognizing the shortcomings, mostly musical but sometimes dramatic, which stood between performance and perfection.

¹ Ibid., p. 106.

opera as well as the audience that it is expected to
Van Vechten the solution was obvious: musical drama.
personality, and artistic imagination was good; however
lacked these qualities was poor. In fact the latter
pretext, the performing stage, which is the thing
category, the imaginative stage, which is the thing
which they moved in the world. It is the thing
in the emphasis of the singer's voice and the
boyant perfection of voice, tone and cadence, as
expressive, interpretive singing, sometimes for the
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Marlette Marlette, Gertrude Lawrence, and Miss Gordon.
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performance and perfection.

Van Vechten was aware of the ephemeral reception of interpretation. Traditionally, it was placed in the province of journalists who recorded the day to day events in music, being too short-lived to endure the demands of critical longevity faced by the author of books about music; but to him it was worthy of perpetuation. For this reason Interpreters and Interpretations is almost unique in our literature on the arts. Only one other volume, Henry T. Parker's 1922 collection of essays, Eighth Notes, shares its concern with the lasting contributions of performers, and this work, culled from the author's columns for the Boston Evening Transcript, is much the more temporal and superficial of the two. Van Vechten succeeded in revealing the personality and being of great interpretive art. His desire for the dramatic fulfillment of an operatic role demanded a deeper satisfaction than operatic music alone could provide. When he found a performer who believed in hyphenating the presentation as well as the name of music-drama, his gratitude for the pleasure that performer gave him was expressed in a prose dedicated to capturing the experience itself. Although his essay on Geraldine Farrar was tempered by reservations not present in his tributes to Olive Fremstad and Mary Garden, Van Vechten must have

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itself. Although his essay on *Conducting* is somewhat

tempered by reservations not present in his related to

Olive Fremstad and Mary Garden, Van Vechten must have

been pleased to report her expression of her art to him: "In my humble way I am an actress who happens to be in opera. I sacrifice tonal beauty to dramatic fitness every time I think it is necessary for an effect, and I shall continue to do it. I leave mere singing to the warblers. I am more interested in acting myself."¹ The flippant disregard for music in such a statement, Van Vechten implied, was indicative of Miss Farrar's peculiar failings, but her defiance of stifling tradition was the mark of her success.² This sincere appreciation of the personal force lent to art by its interpreter never left Van Vechten. As recently as 1947, in program notes written for a recital by Marian Anderson on June 27 of that year, he expressed his familiar pleasure in the creative immersion of an interpreter in her art: "What I noticed more than anything else about her was a kind of dedication of spirit."

The performers, then, were doing their part to supply vitality and artistic imagination. What needed more attention in American opera was the style and

¹ Interpreters and Interpretations, pp. 54-55.

² Van Vechten began his essay on Geraldine Farrar with his disappointment that her autobiography was so inferior to the personality and life of her art. His recent review of Mary Garden's autobiography in The Saturday Review of Literature for May 26, 1951, expresses the same regret.

been pleased to report a new expansion of her art to include
 "in my humble way I am an actress who wishes to be an
 opera. I sacrifice social position to artistic progress
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 financial progress. I have a strong conviction that
 Veatch implied, was implied, that I was a person of
 failings, but her defense of artistic expression was
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 personal force lent to art by the artist, never lost
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- 1
Interpreters and Interpretations, pp. 24-25.
 - 2
 Van Veatch began his essay on German opera with his disappointment that her artistry was so inferior to the personality and life of her art. His recent review of Mary Garden's recital in the Saturday Review of Literature for May 22, 1914, expressed the same regret.

technique of the stage production. He found it static, unimaginative, and oppressive. The sparkle of the music and the interpreter was often smothered by the pomposity and dullness of the complete presentation. There was "no reason why it should be so solemnly conducted," he complained. "There are times at the Metropolitan Opera House when one expects to hear the gong of high mass sound or Professor William Lyon Phelps lecturing on Browning."¹ He saw no reason why the company that scheduled performances at the Metropolitan should not offer Gilbert and Sullivan operas, particularizing The Mikado, which he referred to as "probably the best opera ever written to an English book."² He criticized the lack of art and imagination in staging, casting, setting, and other technical elements of production. In an essay of June, 1914, he heralded the future use of suggestive, artistically functional stage settings to replace the customary flatness of conventional drapes and realistic, photographic accuracy, citing the theories of the little known Gordon Craig and the work of the

¹In the Garret, pp. 207-208.

²Ibid., pp. 198-199.

Russian Ballet to indicate the trend.¹ A year later, he traced the theories of Craig back to the work of Adolphe Appia, who served as a fountainhead for modern staging technique, much as Stanislavsky was the revolutionary theorist for acting.² In Appia's theories and plans for staging Wagner was the basis for the functional, artistic methods later used by Craig, Robert Jones, and others who set out to revolutionize stage decoration, lighting, and effects. Recently, we have seen the fulfillment of their ideas in the innovations of Rudolph Bing at the Metropolitan. Van Vechten pointed to these methods as a means of fulfilling the need created by the lack of taste and artistry given to the staging of opera--particularly that of Wagner. Reminding his reader of the Wagnerian ideal "in which the picture, the word, and the tone shall all be a part of the drama," he envisioned its realization, adding as his characteristic comment that art was not static, that outmoded tradition must give way to the imaginative improvements of time. "Wagner invented a new form of stage art but only in a small

¹Carl Van Vechten, "Stage Decoration As a Fine Art," Music After the Great War (New York: G. Schirmer, 1915), pp. 139-157.

²Carl Van Vechten, "Adolphe Appia and Gordon Craig," Music After the Great War, pp. 161-168.

measure did he succeed in perfecting a method for its successful presentation."¹ To cling to the "traditions" of Bayreuth in 1915 was as vain as to insist on preferring gaslight to electric incandescence.

Crusade for Contemporary Composers

"Music for Museums," written in January, 1915, announced Van Vechten's objections to the standard repertoire of symphony concerts in America; the orchestras improved in musicianship and finesse, he granted, but they played the same established music so continually that it paled through excess repetition and familiarity.² This was one reason for his extensive treatment of new, experimental composers. The other was his sincere belief in the merit of their work and the musical future their revolutionary methods promised. In his first volume he declared that traditional harmony had been exhausted in its conventions, and that the pursuit of disharmony would direct music in the future. The complaint against contemporary composers, he pointed out, has always been that they could not write melody and that they broke "rules" in their harmony. Surveying the musical scene

¹Carl Van Vechten, Music and Bad Manners (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1916), p. 166.

²Music After the Great War, pp. 29-43.

measures did be assessed in relation to the
successful presentation of the material
of Bayreuth in 1915, and the results of the
analysis to electrician management.

Outline for composition of paper

"Music for Musicians" written by
announced Van Vechten's objectives to the
repercussion of symphony conductors in America; the
improved in musicianship and financial, the
they played the same established music as previously
that it gained through exposure to the music of
This was one reason for his extensive knowledge of
experimental composers. The other was his knowledge of
in the merit of their work and his musical sense
revolutionary methods employed. In his first volume he
declared that traditional harmony had been exhausted in
its conventional, and that the pursuit of distant worlds
direct music in the future. The symphonic tradition
contemporary composers, he believed, had not yet begun
that they could not understand and that they were
"rules" in their harmony. Inverting the musical system

¹Carl Van Vechten, *Music and the American Scene* (New
York: A. A. Knopf, 1919), p. 100.

²Music After the Great War, pp. 10-11.

of June, 1915, he concluded that the world would look to Igor Stravinsky, Arnold Schoenberg, and, to a lesser degree, the young Erich Korngold for "messages in tone, disharmonic by nature, and with a complexity of rhythm so complex that it became simple."¹

To strengthen his plea for recognition and performance of the new, prophetic music, he marshalled whatever comment he could find in others who shared his view, but America provided little help. Europeans he could quote more freely and to the point. He selected as a sort of creed the pertinent remarks of Arnold Schoenberg in his Handbuch der Harmonielehre:

If anyone feels dissatisfied with his time, let it not be because that time is no longer the good old time, but because it is not yet the new and better time, the future.

Though I refrain from overprizing originality, I cannot help valuing novelty and the unknown; and therefore, not without excuse, we often hold what is novel to be identical with what is good and beautiful."²

Later, he reproduced for the same purpose a conversation with Feodor Chaliapine in which the Russian singer complains of a stodgy American audience "content to listen forever to Faust and Lucia."

¹Ibid., p. 24.

²Ibid., p. 12.

of June, 1915, he concluded that the world would look
to Igor Stravinsky, Arnold Schoenberg, and to a lesser
degree, the young Irish harpist for "musical progress."
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To strengthen his case for the future and the
formation of the new "musical world," he pointed out
whatever common ground he could find between the two
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Schoenberg in his "Handbook for Composers":

If anyone feels dissatisfied with his work, let
it not be because something is not there, but because
old time, but because it is not yet the new and
better time, the future.
Though I retain a strong feeling of responsibility,
I cannot help feeling lonely and the loneliness and
therefore, not without excuse, we often find the
novel to be identical with what is good and
beautiful."

Later, as representative for the same purpose, a conversation
tion with Feodor Chaliapin, the Russian singer,
complains of a steady "musical decline" and
listed forever to the end of time.

¹ Ibid., p. 2.
² Ibid., p. 12.

In Europe it is different. There you will find the desire for novelty in the theatre. There is a keen interest in the production of a new work. It is all right to enjoy the old things, but one should see life. The audience at the Metropolitan Opera House reminds me of a family that lives in the country and won't travel. It is satisfied with the same view of the same garden forever.¹

Van Vechten's most direct and concerted defense of the new music is found in "The Bridge Burners," from the 1916 volume Music and Bad Manners. This essay utilizes comment from many an authoritative voice and categorically upholds the artistic fidelity of such controversial composers as Stravinsky, Schoenberg, and Leo Ornstein. Elsewhere, he gave them individual treatment.

His most enthusiastic regard was given to the exciting music of Igor Stravinsky. Van Vechten was the first American to write at any length with enthusiasm, authority, prophecy, and insight of this composer. "Igor Stravinsky: a New Composer," dated August 6, 1915, discusses all the works of the Russian to that time, including sections devoted to Petrouchka (1911), The Rite of Spring (1913--this selection was so new that its English title had not been established; Van Vechten refers to it as "The Sacrifice to the Spring"), and The Nightingale (1914).² Van Vechten had heard and

¹Interpreters and Interpretations, p. 102.

²Music After the Great War, pp. 85-117.

In Europe it is different. There is a keen interest in the history of the country, and a right to enjoy the old things, and one can see life. The audience at the theatre is of a high level of culture, and one can see the same view of the world as in the past.

Van Veen's book is a study of the new music in the Netherlands, and the 1916 volume is a study of the music in the Netherlands.

Utilized comment on the music in the Netherlands, and the 1916 volume is a study of the music in the Netherlands. Categorically, the music in the Netherlands is a study of the music in the Netherlands. Versal composers are also mentioned, and the 1916 volume is a study of the music in the Netherlands. Ornstein, however, he has been in the Netherlands.

His most enthusiastic response to the existing music of the Netherlands, and the 1916 volume is a study of the music in the Netherlands. First reaction to the music in the Netherlands, and the 1916 volume is a study of the music in the Netherlands. Authority, however, and the 1916 volume is a study of the music in the Netherlands. "Igor Stravinsky: a new composer," and the 1916 volume is a study of the music in the Netherlands.

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¹The Netherlands and the Netherlands, and the 1916 volume is a study of the music in the Netherlands. ²Musical After the great war, and the 1916 volume is a study of the music in the Netherlands.

marvelled at performances of these works in Paris and London; America, as yet, had heard little of, and knew less about, their creator. Six months later another essay on Stravinsky, "A New Principle in Music," dealt with the singular instrumentation featured in Petrouchka and succeeding work, and the composer's utilization of folk music and popular songs as functional parts of his compositions. "It would not surprise me at all to discover Hello Frisco bobbing up in one of his future works," the critic wrote, calling once again on a blithe clairvoyance to predict Stravinsky's later use of American popular music and jazz.

Another little known artist discussed by Van Vechten with special pleasure was the obscure, capricious but influential figure in the French musical renaissance, Erik Satie. The novelty, the whimsy, the disarming simplicity of Satie's sketches, together with their place in fin de siècle Paris and French impressionism in the arts, gave this curious initiator an affectionate place in Van Vechten's collection of iconoclasts. "Timorous, meticulous, mincing, neat, petulant, petty, are some of the adjectives one might apply to this music, and yet none of them exactly describes its effect, half-spiritual,

marvelled at the richness of the work in this
London, America, as yet, has heard little of it. It is
less about, their object, is a modern French novel, and
on the contrary, "A New Novel" is in the
singularly instructive and beautiful in its
succeeding work, and the author's intention of
music and popular art, a beautiful series of
sitions. "The world of music" is a
Hello France looking at the end of the
the critic wrote, calling once again on a fine
voyance to provide the best of the
popular music and art.
Another little book, which I have
Vachon with special pleasure was the author, and
but influential figure in the French musical world.
Erik Satie. The novelty, the beauty, the
simplicity of Satie's art, for with his
in the absolute style and French Impressionism in the
arts, gave this author a position as a musician
in Van Vachon's collection of Impressionist
melodious, moving, new, beautiful, and some of
the adjectives one might apply to this music, and yet
none of them exactly describes the music, which is

half-mocking! Is there any other music like it?"¹ he asked. The answer had to be negative, but James Huneker qualified it with praise for its writer, derision for its subject:

Carl Van Vechten has told us of Erich [sic] Satie . . . who sets snails and oysters to music, and, no doubt, has composed a Cootie's Serenade for wind instruments with a fine-tooth comb obbligato, and we are amazed at the critical exposition of such a perplexing "case." To let his music speak for itself, would be unwise, as it is not sufficiently explicative. . . . After Van Vechten has polished off his man, we feel that we know all about Satie, so much so that we never wish to hear a bar of his crustacean music. The difference between tweedle-dum and tweedle-dee is infinitesimal, but that very difference may contain great art.²

It is amusing to find Huneker giving Van Vechten the same sort of wry treatment the latter had so often given others, but in this instance the older Huneker had read neither wisely nor well. The essay in question made no pretense of introducing "great music," but offered novel, interesting, and historically significant art. And Huneker would have had trouble finding "a bar of his crustacean music" even if he did decide to hear it. As the essay clearly pointed out, Satie had freed himself from "the tyranny of the bar line," and had published his music without any.

¹Interpreters and Interpretations, p. 262.

²James Huneker, "Concerning Calico Cats," Bedouins, p. 123.

half-mocking! Is there any other music I see in it?
asked. The answer had to be negative, and I was
qualified to write music for the theatre, because
its subject:

Carl Van Vechten has said in his book, "The Music
... who were alike in their love of music, and
doubt, has composed a series of songs and
instruments with a "... of the
are named as the "... of the
perplexing "case," it is the only
would be music, as it is the only
live. ... After Van Vechten has
man, as I feel that we know all about him, so
so that we never wish to hear a note of his
music. The difference between the two is
twofold: the first is that Van Vechten's
may contain great art.

It is amusing to find that Van Vechten's
sort of why present the fact that he was
others, but in this instance the other hand
neither wisely nor well. In every instance
pretense of indifference, "great music," the other hand,
interesting, and that is why it is interesting
Homer would have had trouble finding the bar in
transcendent music, even if he had been to hear it.
the essay clearly pointed out, but it is not
from "the tyranny of the bar line," and it is
music without any.

¹Interpretations and Interpretations, p. 10.
²James Huneker, "Conversations with a Musician,"
Bedouine, p. 123.

It was Van Vechten's purpose in discussing the strange methods of these innovators to excite enough interest to assure a demand that they be heard. While he wrote competently of their techniques and effects, he wrote also to make their names and the personality of their music familiar to the American musician and listener. To this end (and no doubt to gratify his own taste for novelty and striking contrast) he appended to The Merry-Go-Round "An Impertinent Catalogue" of epithets which he titled "The Modern Composer at a Glance." While the list displays Van Vechten in his most whimsical and trivial dress, some of the descriptions are apt enough in revealing both their critic and the composers to deserve repetition:

Igor Stravinsky: Paul Revere in Russia.

Erik Satie: A mandarin with a toy pistol firing into a wedding cake.

Arnold Schoenberg: Six times six is thirty-six --and six is ninety-two!

Claude Debussy: Chantecler [sic] crows pianissimo in whole tones.

Richard Strauss: An ostrich not hiding his head.

Edward Elgar: The footman leaves his accordion in the bishop's carriage.

Percy Grainger: An effete Australian chewing tobacco.

In all Van Vechten's essays about the moderns and the future moderns, his mission is given the personal touch.

He had found their new vitality exciting and remarkable; others might, too. He was careful to attempt only to say why he liked modern music. "If I were to tell others how to like it," he said, "I should be forced to resort to a single sentence: 'Open your ears.'"¹

He might have added "the mind's eye" to this advice, for there was in his essays, as in the music of his favorites, the possibility of secondary experience, the awakening of emotion and association through the musical suggestion of aesthetic imagery. His first book had defiantly demonstrated his preference for the emotional response to impressionism over the austere intellectualism of musical mathematics. "Chamber music!" he had blasphemed. "Its title explains it. It is music intended to be played at home. . . music intended to be played, not to be listened to, except, perhaps, by some doting members of the performers' families."² In his second volume, more mature in its manner and rhetoric, he expressed his interest in the rise of program music, observing that "while painting has become less and less an attempt to represent nature, music has more and more

¹Music and Bad Manners, p. 170.

²Music After the Great War, p. 39.

He had found their new vitality... others might, too. He was sure... why he liked modern music. It was so full of... how to like it. He thought of music as a means to release

to a single sentence. He might have added that music was a... advice, for there was in his attitude, as in the attitude of his favorites, the possibility of a personal response to the awakening of emotion and intellect in music. The musical suggestion of emotional intensity, the kind of boom

had defiantly demonstrated his preference for the emotional response to representation. As often he answered himself-lecturism of musical representation. "I cannot understand" he had blasphemed. "It is like a machine. It is intended to be played at times. It is intended to be played, not to be listened to, except, perhaps, by some

dotting members of the bourgeoisie. In his second volume, when he was in his hands and he expressed his interest in the rise of modern music, observing that "while listening to modern music and to an attempt to represent nature, music has not only failed

¹Music and the Machine, p. 170.

²Music and the Machine, p. 170.

attempted concrete representation."¹ The traditional forces that opposed such sympathies and dismissed such music were formidable. Daniel Gregory Mason was condemning Strauss for his childish "programmism," Debussy for his "sensationalism," both typical to the traditional critic of the new music which, he asserted, pandered to the elements in music which were not the music itself. "Programmism," in Mason's view, afforded stories and realistic sounds, and impressionism, or "sensationalism," feeding on novelty, substituted harmonic experiments for lofty melody, aiming "primarily at sensuous rather than mental or spiritual values."² While such an opinion can still be respected as the expression of a cultivated, intellectual taste, its lack of foresight is amply demonstrated by the trends of music in our century.

The Music of Spain

Carl Van Vechten's most distinct contribution to our literature on music is his proficient volume, The Music of Spain (1918).³ "Music and Spain," an

¹Music and Bad Manners, pp. 178-179.

²Daniel Gregory Mason, "Democracy and Music," Contemporary Composers (New York: Macmillan, c. 1918), pp. 3-42.

³Carl Van Vechten, The Music of Spain (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1918).

attempted concrete representation. The musical
forces that opposed each other and clashed
music were formidable. The musical forces
struggled for his children. The musical forces
"sensationalism," both of which are the result
of the new music which he attacked, and the
elements in music which were not the result
"programmatic," in music's view, of the
realistic sounds, and the programmatic, or
feeding on novelty, substituted human experience for
fifty melody, and the "musical" in music and
mental or spiritual values. The music was not
still be respected as the result of a
intellectual case, the lack of which is
demonstrated by the music in the music.

The Music of 1918

Carl Van Vechten's music is a
to our literature on music is the result of
The Music of 1918 (1918) by Carl Van Vechten

¹Music and the Human, pp. 11-12.
²Daniel Gregory Mason, "The Music of 1918,"
Contemporary Composers (New York: Macmillan, 1918),
pp. 3-4.
³Carl Van Vechten, The Music of 1918,
A. A. Knopf, 1918.

exploratory essay printed earlier in The Merry-Go-Round, was meant to fill a surprising gap in our musical knowledge, for no previous general commentary on its subject had appeared in our language.¹ Around this center, Van Vechten's interest in the lively arts of the Spanish and his assiduous search through its backgrounds and manifestations built a compendium of Spanish music which still serves both scholarly and curious readers as an absorbing, although unconventional study of its subject.² The central essay, which explored such varied commentaries as Richard Ford's Gatherings From Spain, Gautier's Voyage en Espagne, and Havelock Ellis's The Soul of Spain for its first-hand anecdotes and observations, is a thorough study of the forms and spirit of Spanish dances, the music, and the musicians of Spain. As published later in The Music of Spain, the study includes forty-eight pages of notes on the text which expand the original essay and document the comprehensive research supporting the work. In this separate volume Van Vechten appended

¹Although its approach to the subject was quite different, the three volumes by A. Soubies, Histoire de la Musique: Espagne, were published in 1900, eighteen years before Van Vechten's study appeared.

²Gilbert Chase, The Music of Spain (1941) is now generally considered the most authoritative work on the subject.

exploratory essay printed earlier in the Journal of Music
was meant to fill a gap in the literature
ledge, for no previous general survey of the subject
had appeared in our language.¹ It was this concern
Vachon's interest in the history of the subject and
his extensive search through the literature which
led him to a realization of the need for a
series both scholarly and comprehensive, and
although undoubtedly a task of no small
general essay, which explored some of the
as Richard Ford's Japanese Music, Gustav
on Japanese, and Harold L. Smith's Music of Japan
first-hand anecdotal and descriptive study of the
study of the form and spirit of Japanese music, the
music, and the music of Japan, the music of Japan
in the music of Japan, the study of Japan's
pages of notes on the text which expand the original
essay and document the composer's creative process
the work. In this separate volume the reader is

¹Although the approach to the subject was quite
different, the three volumes of A. N. S. Smith's
Japanese Music, were published in 1933, fifteen
years before Van Vachon's study appeared.

²Albert Chase, The Music of Japan (1911) is
now generally considered the best authoritative work on
the subject.

a "histoire sommaire de Carmen" entitled "From George Borrow to Mary Garden," which traces Carmen from the sources used by Prosper Mérimée through Bizet's operatic adaptation, adding a catalogue of performances which culminates in Miss Garden's interpretation. Carmen is mentioned only briefly in the central study, "Music and Spain," because, as the essay demonstrates, it is not really Spanish. "The Land of Joy," a record of Van Vechten's overflow of emotional and artistic satisfaction after his first encounter with authentic Spanish dancing and singing, is also included in the volume. The occasion it celebrated was the otherwise unheralded New York performance of "The Land of Joy" by a Spanish company in 1917. Elsewhere, he rounded out his excursions into Iberian arts by reporting the activities in cosmopolitan New York of the Spanish theatre, and by devoting an informative, appreciative essay to the leading representative of the modern school of Spanish composition, Isaac Albéniz, both appearing in his next book, In the Garret.

Criticism of the Dance

The spirited zarzuelas, fandangos, and jotas of Spain were not the only dancing that supplied subjects for Van Vechten's criticism. He wrote dance reviews for the New York Times and published essays covering the field

of the dance from early ballet to Isadora Duncan. Excited by the accomplishments of modern ballet, he wrote favorably of Leo Delibes, naming him "the father of the modern ballet" because his ballet music was the first to give the dancer something deeply expressive; before Delibes, musical scores had been shallow and mechanical, composed chiefly to show off technique.¹

He wrote intimately and skilfully of the Russian Ballet as early as November, 1915, praising in detail its technical and emotional union of many arts; painting, music, drama, design, poetry, and staging. He continually called the attention of operatic producers to the example of artistic unity he found in this ballet, for it provided the aesthetic taste and overall effects that opera lacked. The new art of stage decoration he found already an integrated part of the Russian dancers' productions.

He singled out the unbelievable artistry of Waslav Nijinsky for the most thoroughly encomiastic of all his discussions of interpretive art. The essay, one of his most brilliant and lucid pieces of writing, happily avoided treating the spectacular aspects of Nijinsky's dancing as such. Instead, the author's wonder and praise were given to the consummate wholeness of the performance, the flawless expression of the dancer's complete inter-

¹Carl Van Vechten, "Leo Delibes," Excavations, p.206.

of the dance from early ballet to modern dance. It is
by the accomplishments of modern ballet, and the discovery
of the ballet, that the "ballet" of the modern
ballet" because his ballet was not the ballet of the
the dancer something new, something different. He called
musical scores and the ballet was not the ballet of the
chiefly to show the ballet as a whole, and not the
He wrote the ballet, and the ballet was not the ballet of the
ballet as early as the year 1913, and the ballet was not the ballet of the
its technical and artistic value of many other ballets.
music, drama, dancing, poetry, and singing. He called the
called the attention of the audience to the value
of artistic unity he found in the ballet, for it was
the aesthetic sense and artistic sense that were
the new art of stage decoration in the modern ballet.
integrated part of the Russian ballet, and the
He singled out the most important features of the
Nijinsky for the most thoroughly modern ballet of his
discussions of innovative art. The essay, one of his
most brilliant and best pieces of writing, and
avoided treating the technical aspects of Nijinsky's
dancing as such. Instead, the author's words and praise
were given to the composer's wholeness of the performance,
the flawless expression of the dancer's complete inter-

pretation in every nuance of movement, as well as in the strenuous display of agility. "It seems to me," he wrote as he considered Nijinsky's achievement, "that in his chosen medium he approaches perfection. What he attempts to do, he always does perfectly. Can one say as much for any other interpreter?"¹

His essay on the interpretive dance techniques of Isadora Duncan had only a spark of the enthusiastic fire found in his tribute to the Russian.² It did, however, recognize a revolutionary spirit in this forerunner of modern dance, and it celebrated in her work two of the qualities which he demanded of the interpretive artist, devoted spirit and unique personality.

The earlier dance reviews which Van Vechten wrote for the New York Times were printed unsigned, but many of them were revived for publication by Dance Index in its three-in-one issue for September, October, and November of 1942. The quality and significance of this work, even at this late date, inspired John Martin's tribute to the collection.

[These reviews] form a body of criticism that is an uncommonly valuable contribution to America's

¹Interpreters and Interpretations, p. 173.

²The Merry-Go-Round, pp. 307-317.

protection in every manner of movement. It is in the
astronomical display of objects. It is in the
as he considered it. It is in the
chosen medium he expressed his feelings. It is in the
to do, he rivaled the best of the world. It is in the
any other interpretation.
His essay on the comparative value of the
of Isadora Duncan and the value of the
time found in his life to the world. It is in the
however, recognize a revolution in the world.
runner of modern dance, and it is in the
two of the qualities which he possessed. It is in the
positive artistic, dynamic, and in the world.
The earlier dance review which was written
for the New York Times were published. It is in the
of them were revised for publication. It is in the
in its three-in-one issue for January, 1915, and
November of 1915. The quality and the attitude of the
work, even at this late date, is in the
tribute to the collection.

[These reviews form a body of criticism
an uncommonly valuable contribution to the world's

¹Interpreters and Interpretations, p. 115.
²The Henry-Bonham, p. 115.

literature in that field. Though they were written thirty years ago, their judgments are as sound as they ever were and the prescience they exhibit in an art in which America. . . was abysmally illiterate bespeaks a remarkably sensitive and forward-looking mind. That they played a major part in the creation of public taste cannot be gainsaid.¹

It is noteworthy to report that by 1946, in his review of Grace Robert's Borzoi Book of Ballets, Van Vechten was able to write, with his customary appreciation for the gifted interpreter, of Jerome Robbins, Agnes DeMille, Nora Kaye, and other successful American artists in the field of ballet.²

Estimate of Jazz

Until the first World War, American music had not been productive, it had been reproductive. It assimilated much but contributed little. Our nineteenth-century composers and those who carried American composition into the twentieth century wrote music in America, not American music. The notable exception was Stephen Foster.

¹John Martin, introduction to Dance Index, I (Sept., Oct., Nov., 1942), n. p.

²New York Herald Weekly Book Review (June 16, 1946), p. 6. Van Vechten is still an ardent and appreciative patron of ballet and all forms of the dance. His opinion and judgment, while no longer "professional" criticism, are as highly regarded by professionals in the art as ever.

The source, the color, and the native appeal of Foster's songs came from the unstudied melodic style and rhythm of the music developed by the American Negro. These songs reflected the upper and lower surfaces of a folk personality, gayety and resignation, an abandonment to present joy and a timeless, rootless nostalgia: the minstrel and the mourner. Their twentieth-century heirs are ragtime and jazz, homogenized terms for the split personality in the spontaneous combustion of "dixieland" improvisation and the fluid lament of the blues.

Writing for the generation of the Twenties, Van Vechten was one of a very few who recognized in jazz music and the middleground between it and its folk origins, ragtime, an indigenous art capable of giving blood and tissue to the musical bones we had imported from Europe. In the early Twenties American jazz had invaded Paris, and that city's reception of it included a flood of serious essays by Parisian intellectuals. In 1924, Gilbert Seldes still courted derision by writing, "If --before we have produced something better--we give up jazz we shall be sacrificing nearly all there is of gaiety and liveliness and rhythmic power in our lives."¹

¹Gilbert Seldes, The Seven Lively Arts (New York: Harper & Bros., 1924), p. 83.

The source, for instance, and the native source of

Forster's songs come from the English and Scottish

rhythm of the music developed by the English and

These songs reflected the upper and lower classes of

folk personality, gayety and resignation, an element

to present joy and a throb, a throb of hope and

minstrel and the minstrel. Their twelfth-century

heirs are pagans and Jews, who sang a song for the

split personality of the modern world.

"Dixieland" improvisation and the final lament of the

blues.

Writing of the general idea of the blues,

Van Vechten was one of a very few who recognized the

music and the religious nature of the blues as

regime, an indigenous and essential part of the

life of the Negro, and we are indebted to him

In the early twenties American writers looked for

and that city's reputation of it reached a point of

serious essays by Pauline T. P. in 1924.

Gilbert Seligman still counted certain of the

--before we have produced something better--he

that we shall be something more than a

gaiety and liveliness and perhaps power in our

Gilbert Seligman, The Negro, New York

Harper & Bros., 1924.

In an essay dated January 23, 1917, Van Vechten approved and applauded the popular work of such ragtime composers as Lewis F. Muir, Irving Berlin, and Louis A. Hirsch, "the true grandfathers of the Great American Composer of the year 2001." On their popular (hence traditionally to be regarded as inferior) product, he pronounced prophetic judgment: "It is the only music produced in America today which is worth the paper it is written on. It is the only American music which is enjoyed by the nation. . . ; it is the only American music which is heard abroad. . . , and it is the only music on which the musicians of our land can build on [sic] in the future."¹

To the bulk of his contemporary critics, a confusion of the art with the lack of intellectual austerity involved in its production rendered jazz insignificant, if not profane. To the traditional critic it was "a meaningless stir-about, a commotion without purpose, an epilepsy simulating controlled muscular action."² Daniel Gregory Mason took supercilious issue with Van Vechten, disparaging the latter's remarks concerning the potential variety in the syncopation of ragtime. He

¹Interpreters and Interpretations, pp. 279-280.

²Mason, Contemporary Composers, p. 247.

In an essay dated January 25, 1917, Van Veen has remarked
and explained the popular form of modern American literature
as Lewis i. Lewis, living Berlin, and Louis A. Lewis.
"the true grandeur of the great American literature of
the year 2001." On their political and social
to be regarded as literary products, and to be
gnostic judgment. It is a judgment which is
America today which is worth the study of its literature.
It is the only American music which is not a
nation. . . ; it is the only American music which
heard abroad. . . and it is the only music of which
the musicians of our land can truly say: "this is
future."

To the public of this contemporary world, a new
vision of the art with the lack of intellectual evolution
involved in the production of new literature.
it not profound, to the traditional, which is the
meaningless slip-slop, a new music without any sense,
an epilepsy, a kind of controlled madness, which is
Daniel Gregory Mason took up the issue when Van
Veen, disagreeing with the latter's remarks, pointed out
potential variety in the symposium of music.

¹ Interpretations and Interpretations, pp. 159-160.
Mason, Contemporary Music, p. 211.

scoffed at those who "have even challenged comparison of it with the rhythmic vigors of Beethoven and Schumann," and footnoted this, "See, for instance, Mr. Carl van Vechten's [sic] 'Interpreters and Interpretations.'"¹ The validity of the remarks about jazz syncopation in that book has been heard by ears which have since been opened, and has been recorded in the scholarly prose of an objective authority, Adolfo Salazar, who wrote in 1946 that American jazz "undoubtedly awakens stimuli in the composer, for example for its combinations of time values and its superimpositions of rhythms on a constant monorhythmic base with its one beat which permits, obviously, of every variety of superimposed polyrhythms."²

What set Van Vechten apart from other serious critics writing early treatments of jazz was his predilection for animation and personality in art, and his instinctive rapport with its sources. He listened to jazz because it was alive, because it was emotionally expressive, not because he was a music critic covering a beat. His enthusiasm was primary--the result of personal pleasure; his critical appraisal was the formal

¹Ibid., p. 242.

²Adolfo Salazar, Music in Our Time, Trans. by Isabel Pope (New York: W. W. Norton, 1946), p. 318.

ascribed as those who have even admitted the possibility
of it with the rhythmic, and of the rhythm and the
and footnotes this, "See, for instance, the last
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The validity of the remarks about jazz suggested in
that book has been based by some who have since been
opposed, and has been recorded in the scholarly work of
an objective authority, Adolfo Salazar, who wrote in
1940 that American jazz "undoubtedly seems alien to
the composer, for example for its complexity of the
values and its superimposition of rhythms on a constant
monorhythmic base with its one beat taken for granted,
obviously, of every variety of superimposed polyrhythms.
What are Vesilov's remarks about from other sources
and the whole early treatment of jazz was the product
of a section for animation and personality in art, and the
instinctive rapport with its sources. He listened to
jazz because it was alive, because it was so obviously
expressive, not because he was a naive critic covering
a beat. His enthusiasm was genuine--the result of
personal pleasure; his criticism, however, was for all

¹ Ibid., p. 212.

² Adolfo Salazar, *Music in Our Time*, Trans. by
Isabel Pope (New York: W. W. Norton, 1941), p. 212.

contemplation of the thing that stimulated that pleasure. His active participation in the recognition of the Negro's music was one of the first bold steps in a life which has since contributed so much to the acceptance of that race's accomplishments. He was the logical writer to introduce, through the pages of Vanity Fair and other publications, Ethel Waters (who has remembered him graciously in her autobiography) and the unrelated queens of the blues, Clara, Mamie, and Bessie Smith. Reminiscing of the latter, now firmly established in the hierarchy by the serious historians of jazz, Van Vechten remembers having "boxes and boxes" of her phonograph records "which I played and played in the early 'twenties and everybody who came to my apartment was invited to hear them."¹ W. C. Handy, the hardy composer of the St. Louis Blues, after citing the support of the blues by the Negro publications Opportunity and The Crisis, wrote: "But more than any other, perhaps, the pen that set tongues to wagging, ears listening and feet dancing to the blues was that of the celebrated author and writer, Carl Van Vechten, who said the folk blues 'far transcend the spirituals in their poetic values, while as music they

¹Carl Van Vechten, "Memories of Bessie Smith," Jazz Record, No. 58 (Sept., 1947), p. 6.

are frequently of at least equal importance."¹

The difference was that Van Vechten not only thought about the Negro's music and wrote of it, he felt it and understood it. He had lived close to it for ten years when he wrote in his valedictory to music criticism, "Jazz may not be the last hope of American music, nor yet the best hope, but at present [March, 1924], I am convinced, it is its only hope."²

The Popular Spread of Music in America

One of the most remarkable things about music in twentieth-century America is its ubiquity. Through our media of mass entertainment, music reaches us publicly and privately more consistently and in more variety than any other of the fine arts. It meets all levels of America through radio, the movies, television, the theatre, the dance orchestras, the jazz bands, phonograph recordings, the concert hall, school bands and orchestras, and the omnipresent juke box accepting nickels for three-minute serenades in every corner of the country. There is scarcely any organized entertainment in America that does not involve music. The unseen but ineluctable

¹W. C. Handy, Father of the Blues (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1941), pp. 229-230.

²Carl Van Vechten, Red (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1925), p. xv.

are frequently of at least equal importance.¹
The difference was that Van Vorst not only
thought about the Negro's social and artistic life
it and understood it. He had lived close to it for ten
years when he wrote his valuable history of Negro criticism.
"Jazz may not be the last hope of American civilization
yet the best hope, but as [Van Vorst], 1924, I am
convinced, it is the only hope."²

The Popular Record of Music in America

One of the most remarkable things about music in
twentieth-century America is its ubiquity. Through our
media of mass entertainment, music reaches us daily
and privately more consciously and in more variety than
any other of the fine arts. It meets all levels of
America through radio, the movies, television, the theatre,
the dance orchestra, the jazz band, symphony, radio-
grams, the concert hall, school bands and orchestras,
and the omnipresent juke box accepting requests for three-
minute recordings in every corner of the country. There
is scarcely any organized outlet for music in America that
does not involve music. The masses are musical.

¹W. C. Handy, Father of the Blues (New York:
The Seemingly Co., 1941), pp. 259-260.
²Carl Van Vorst, How Jazz Came to America (New York:
1925), p. xv.

musician at the electronic organ serves radio drama much as the indefatigable movie house pianist served the early films. Clubs, restaurants, taverns, and hamburger kiosks all feature some musical background as a part of the pleasure and atmosphere of dining out, ranging from the suave dinner music of an ensemble in sophisticated attire, to the offerings of nickel-plated record selectors confronting every patron of the drinks-and-eats establishment. Even the masculine haven of athletic sports has taken in music as a featured partner; football games vie for attention with the snappy productions of costumed bands monopolizing time-out periods and half-time entertainment. Baseball parks fill the intervals between innings with recorded music played over their public address systems and for special contests provide bands of playful musicians to enliven the occasion. The importance of any sporting event is signalled by the presence of a renowned vocal artist leading the dedicatory singing of the national anthem.

As censorious critics and cultural historians, we may deplore some of the less tasteful musical activities in our society; singing commercials on the radio and the amplified programs of music that meet the citizen whether he is willing or not in such public places as New York's Grand Central Station are not without their

insidious aspects. Yet, it would be difficult to deny that the musical quotient of the average American and the vitality of American music have benefited enormously from the wholesale distribution of music in the United States.

The spread in the occasions for music has been equalized by a spread in the variety of music produced. Musicians as well as public have become familiar with the most popular aspects of the art as well as the most esoteric. The orchestrations of popular bands have gradually reached out for the fullness and technical knowledge of serious music, while their own innovations in harmony and rhythm have been caught and reflected by leading composers. Studio orchestras, performing for radio, movies, and recordings, have enlisted the talents of some of the nation's most skilled performers, and have featured stylish arrangements which fill in the narrowing middleground between popular and serious music. Through such diversification, "popular" music has become serious, and "serious" music has become popular.

In addition, music has become an artistic supplement to drama. Its power of suggestion, association, color, and mood has made it an invaluable asset to emotional effects in any field. Radio would be pale indeed without it. The motion pictures engage some of

institutions aspects. It is worth mentioning that the musical quality of the music is not the only

factor of American music, but the quality of the music is also a factor.

From the wholehearted devotion of music in the United States.

The spread in the musical world for the past few

decades by a spread in the variety of musical forms.

Musicians as well as people have become familiar with the most popular aspects of music as well as the most

esoteric. The orchestra, which was once the mainstay of popular music, has

gradually reached out for the folk music and the

knowledge of serious music, while the folk music and the

in harmony and rhythm have been changed and reflected in

leading composers. The orchestra, which was once the mainstay of popular music, has

radio, movies, and recordings, have changed the nature of the music and the

of some of the nation's most skilled performers, and

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Through such diversification, "popular" music has become

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In addition, music has become an artistic medium.

ment to drama. Its power of suggestion, association,

color, and mood has made it an invaluable asset to

emotional effects in any field. Radio would be

indeed without it. The radio picture would be

our most distinguished composers to write musical scores appropriate to the demands of films. Musical comedy on the stage produces music which is less and less ephemeral as it becomes more and more an integrated part of its show.

At the outset of the Twenties, all these developments were already under way. Ragtime, jazz, tin-pan alley, Broadway musicals, effervescent vaudeville, and musical supplements for the silent movies in their huge movie palaces, all the vital beginnings, waiting only for the maturity of the movies, the perfection of the phonograph, and the birth of commercial radio, were an active part of America's musical scene. Carl Van Vechten was virtually the only critic in his era who detected the vitality and promise of these elements and wrote prophetically of their place in American music.

In 1915, when silent movies were still a curiosity and a national novelty, Van Vechten saw the need for expressive music in the new art medium. This music, he predicted with excitement, would not be retarded by the traditional millstones of "working-out" or overall development, and would be more demanding of the futurist composer. "The ultimate moving picture score," he wrote, "will be something more than sentimental accompaniment."¹

¹Music and Bad Manners, p. 54.

our most distinguished composers, for the music is
appropriate to the demands of the film, and the
the stage produces music which is lost and is
as it becomes more and more an integrated part of the
show.

At the outset of the twenties, the music
was already under the influence of the
alley, Broadway musical, and the film
musical supplements for the silent movies in
movie palaces, all the vital beginning, which only
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phonograph, and the birth of commercial radio, were an
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was virtually the only music in the world who reflected
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In 1915, when silent movies were still a novelty,
and a national novelty, Van Meter and the most for
expressive music in the new art scene. This music, as
predicted with excitement, would not be rejected by the
traditional mistletoe of "work-in-the" or "work-in-the"
development, and would be more demanding of the technical
composer. "The ultimate moving picture score," he wrote,
"will be something more than sentimental accompaniment."

¹Music and the Moving Picture, p. 11.

The task would be worthy of the greatest musical talent. "For the same reason that d'Annunzio, very early in the career of the moving picture, wrote a scenario for a film, I should not be surprised to learn that Richard Strauss was under contract to construct an accompaniment to a screened drama."¹ The prediction that sounded so glib in 1915 has since been amply validated and realized in the movie music written by such first-rank modern composers as Aaron Copland, Kurt Weil, Serge Prokofief, Dmitri Shostakovitch and Virgil Thomson.

In the same essay, he deplored the rehash of extant, stereotyped selections and themes used by the movie house orchestras as a patchwork score to accompany silent films. "It is strange," he lamented, "but it has occurred to no one that the moving picture demands a new kind of music."² The readers of this essay, if one can accept the response of Russell Ramsey in his review as typical, treated "Music for the Movies" as a thought which "excites [Van Vechten's] irrepressible humor," and accepted it as the amusing fantasy of a whimsical writer.³

¹Ibid., p. 53.

²Ibid., p. 54.

³Russell Ramsey, "Modern Tendencies in Music," The Dial (Jan. 11, 1917), p. 22.

The task would be worth it if the reviewer's remarks were
"for the same reason that it is a very early in the
career of the moving picture, and a very early in the
I should not be surprised to find that the reviewer's
was under contract to the studio, and that the reviewer's
screened drama." The reviewer's remarks are very early in the
in 1915 has also been early in the career of the moving
the movie made with the same writer, and the reviewer's
posers as Aaron Copland, and the reviewer's remarks are
Gustav Shostakovich and the reviewer's remarks are
In the same essay, he declares the reason of
extent, stereotyped selections and themes used by the
movie houses on the basis of a personal score to the
silent film. "It is strange, he declares, that it has
occurred to no one that the reviewer's remarks are a new
kind of music." The reviewer's remarks are a new
accept the response of Russell in his review as
typical, treated "music for the masses" as a contempt
which "excited [Van Veen's] [unpleasant] reaction."
and accepted it as the usual kind of a reviewer's
writer.

¹ Ibid. p. 55.
² Russell Ramsey, "The Dial" (Jan. 11, 1914) p. 55.
The Dial (Jan. 11, 1914) p. 55.

In "The Importance of Electrical Picture Concerts,"¹ he played with the idea that the incidental music and intermission concerts at moving picture theatres in 1916 were becoming important for the audition of seldom concertized compositions. In the variety they sought, America was finally breaking away from the closed shop of concert favorites, and in the mixed audience which heard these performances, a quick musical education was being given to many. Everyone benefited; those who heard music only in the theatres were being initiated painlessly, while those limited by what they heard in the tradition-bound concert program were developing their taste and knowledge.

He extended these ideas in an essay of 1921 entitled "Music for Program Notes" to suggest a union of the concert and the movies, strikingly similar to the joint achievement of Leopold Stokowsky and Walt Disney in the latter's production of animated drawings set to symphonic music, Fantasia. While Van Vechten's essay discussed the projection of printed as well as pictorial program notes, it was direct in its suggestion that someone "illustrate symphonic poems, all program music, indeed, by appropriate accompanying action on the screen." The parallel to Fantasia is furthered by his selection of

¹Interpreters and Interpretations, pp. 287-296.

In "The Importance of Musical Movement" he played with the idea that the musical movement and the mission concerns of having musical movement in 1915 were becoming important for the realization of action concerning composition. In some ways, they were, and in some ways they were not. Finally pressing away from the closed shop of concert, and in the more open world of the theatre, a different musical concept was being given to many. Everyone participated; those who had music only in the theatre were being initiated painfully, while those limited by what they heard in the traditional concert program were developing their taste and knowledge. He extended these ideas in an essay of 1914 entitled "Music for Future Generations" to suggest a kind of the concert and the theatre, particularly relating to the joint achievement of Joseph Schumann and Felix Mendelssohn in the latter's production of chamber music and in symphonic music, Fantasies. While the composer's essay discussed the production of music as well as the musical program notes, it was linked in its own section and some one "illustrate symphonic music, all music, music, music" by appropriate accompanying notes on the program. The parallel to Fantasies is observed by the selection

¹Interpreters and Interpretations, pp. 237-238.

Dukas' "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," one of the compositions chosen by Disney, as a concrete example. At length he cited the action involved in the theme of the broomstick demon, visualizing the scene-with-music, and concluded: "This magic broom, pouring out pails of water, could be cleverly counterfeited on the silver sheets, and, I think that the music performed before this appropriate action would make treble the ordinary effect."¹

Besides his active support of the Negro's music, Van Vechten celebrated the contribution of popular music-hall figures to the musical life of the country. During his younger days in Cedar Rapids, he had maintained an enthusiasm for the personalities of this theatrical realm. In New York he sensed its part in the growing musical expression of America. In "Old Days and New," he discussed the popular appeal of the stage musical with sentiment and critical praise, calling forth in April, 1917, a parade of contemporary celebrities such as Al

¹Red, p. 78. Gunther R. Lessing, vice-president of Walt Disney Productions, has assured me after consulting Mr. Disney and others concerned with their enterprise that the similarity is coincidental. "Sorcerer's Apprentice was 'a natural' for our medium," he states, "and Walt toyed with the underlying idea for a long time before Fantasia was produced." For some ten years before Disney had been producing short subjects under the generic title "Silly Symphony," the action of which was descriptive of well-known musical compositions.

12

Dukas' "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," one of the most-
famous chosen by Disney, as a concrete example. But later on
he cited the action involved in the scene in the 1935
stick figure, visualizing the scene with a stick figure
instead: "This magic wand, turning one half of water,
could be cleverly substituted on the stick figure,
and, I think that the whole performance would be a success.
Private action would make the stick figure the ordinary person."
Besides his active support of the stick figure,
Van Vechten celebrated the contribution of popular music
half figure to the musical life of the country. During
his younger days in New York, he had collected an
enthusiasm for the possibilities of this musical
medium. In New York he passed his time in the theatre,
musical expression of America. In 1917 he was now
he discussed the popular aspect of the stick figure with
enthusiasm and critical analysis, calling forth in 1917,
1917, a parade of contemporary celebrities such as Al

I
of Walt Disney Productions, has assumed as after con-
sulting Mr. Disney and others concerned with the stick figure
press that the stick figure is a "stick figure," as stated.
Apprentice was "a natural" for our medium, as stated.
"and Walt loved with the stick figure for a long time
before the stick figure was produced." For some ten years before
Disney had been producing short subjects under the general
title "Stiffy Symphonies," the stick figure which was a series
five of well-known musical compositions.

Jolson, Elsie Janis, Irving Berlin,¹ Jerome Kern and Fanny Brice, the majority of whom are still familiar and beloved to the American public today. He recognized in the verve and personality of their popular art a lively partner for American jazz.

Van Vechten's final book of essays on musical subjects reflected a personal distaste for the artificial occasions for hearing music. Through his career as a critic he had attended concert after concert with a growing resentment at the necessity of hearing other people's programs in the harsh, unsuitable, over-lighted public surroundings of the concert hall. The two essays which conclude the volume, "On Hearing What You Want When You Want It" (1920), and "Cordite for Concerts" (1921), are a fitting climax to a career which had foreseen so much of America's musical development. The first of these, the title of which was so perfect for latter day advertising of phonograph records, bewailed the fact that music occupies time rather than space, and, for that reason, places the listener at the mercy of the

¹ Van Vechten's regard for this popular composer was especially aggressive. In an essay of January, 1918, he wrote, "Personally I can say that I prefer Irving Berlin's music to that of Edward MacDowell and I would like to have some one prove to me that this position is untenable." (The Merry-Go-Round, p. 25).

Johnson, Elsie Jarvis, living partner, former Elsie and
 Henry Bruce, the majority of whom are still living, and
 believed to the American public today. The recognition of
 the nerve and parasitism of their partner and a living
 partner for American Jews.

Van Vechten's final book of essays on music
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 public surroundings of the concert hall. The book was
 which concludes the volume, "The American Musician and the
 You Want It" (1920), and "Credits for Concerts" (1921).
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 these, the title of which was "The Musician for Today"
 advertising of phonograph records, revealed the fact
 that music occupies the same place in the life of the
 that reason, places the listener at the mercy of the

Van Vechten's regard for the popular composer
 was especially aggressive. In an essay of January, 1912,
 he wrote, "Personally I can say that I never in my
 Berlin's music to that of the modern and the world.
 like to have some one prove to me that this quality is
 unchangeable." (The Henry-Gordon, p. 23).

selections of others. No other art, he pointed out, establishes such a discouraging condition for its audience; music needed to become more individually accessible, subject to personal taste and mood, before it could fulfill its artistic role completely.

The final essay turned on the uncomfortable and inappropriate settings one had to survive in order to hear music. Its personal revolt was as honest and indignant as anything its congenial author had written:

"...concerts should not be given in halls. . . , even the idea of the concert as it exists is a false and artificial conception. It is impossible for me to enjoy music in a brilliantly lighted, badly ventilated auditorium."¹

Today we are unaware that such battles had to be fought. We relax in our living rooms to hear the music we choose from our record libraries, or we listen in the same position of ease to the brilliant broadcasts of our great symphonies. Frank Lloyd Wright works over his architectural drawing board in his studio or moves through the rambling buildings at Taliesen, Wisconsin, with hidden speakers offering the accompaniment of Mozart and Bach; the factory worker and the garage mechanic

¹Red, p. 197.

selection of artists. The same art, no matter how
established such a disconcerting condition is, is
music needed to become more fully established.
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till its artistic role is complete.

The final essay turned out to be a somewhat
inappropriate subject and had to be revised.
new music. The personnel revolt was as much a
want as anything in commercial music and
"personnel" should not be given in detail. . . .
the idea of the concert as it exists in a hall and
artificial conception. It is impossible for me to enjoy
music in a brilliantly lit hall. I prefer a small
forum."

Today we are unaware that such matters have to
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in the same position of ease to the brilliant broadcasts
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perform their tasks against the background of recorded music broadcast for their pleasure and efficiency during the working day; the midnight shift has the company of an all-night record show on its radio to provide companionship and music for its lonely hours. Jazz has become the subject of concerts, and concert music has invaded the popular arenas. The visions of music being both artistic and popular, expressive of both America and of the individual, present in our environment as both a social and personal pleasure at all levels of society, have been fulfilled.

Conclusion to His Career as Music Critic

Van Vechten places his first doubts about continuing his role as music critic at about 1918. With the publication of Red in 1924, he announced his voluntary retirement from his first profession. He was forty-four. In his youth, he recalled, he had held the conviction that age was a mark of doldrums, that old dogs ignored new tricks. "When I was younger I held the firm belief that after forty the cells hardened and that prejudices were formed which precluded the possibility of the welcoming of novelty. From almost the moment I began to write on the subject of music, therefore, I took it upon myself to attack the older men who

perform their tasks against the background of recorded music broadcast for their pleasure and edification during the working day; the traditional half hour of music on an all-night record show on the radio to provide companionship and music for the lonely listener. Music has become the subject of conversation and the subject of the popular press. The artistic and popular, the individual, present in our environment as both social and personal pleasure at all levels of society have been fulfilled.

Conclusion to his career as a critic

Van Vechten placed his first review about 1910, during his role as music critic at about 1910. In the publication of Red in 1921, he announced his voluntary retirement from his first position. He was forty-four. In his youth, he recalled, he had held the conviction that age was a mark of nobility, and he had gone ignored and unloved. "When I was younger I held the firm belief that after forty the critic reached a stage that prejudices were formed which prevented the possibility of the welcoming of novelty. For almost the moment I began to write on the subject of music, therefore, I look upon myself as a critic the other way who

had closed their minds to new ideas." After the years devoted to concerts and causes, he added with a typical humorous irony, "I recognized the symptoms of age creeping upon me. I began to prefer Johann Strauss waltzes to the last sonatas of Beethoven; Chopin pleased me more than Brahms."¹

He may have recalled, whimsically, a passage devoted to Stravinsky's originality written eight years earlier, in which he had mused, parenthetically,

You must realize how much your mind wanders at a symphony concert. It is impossible to concentrate one's complete attention on the performance of a long work except at those times when some new phrase or some new turn in the working-out of a theme strikes the ear. There is so much of the music that is familiar, because it has occurred in so much music before. . . . There are those, I am forced to admit, who can only concentrate on that which is perfectly familiar to them.²

Looking back on his earliest attempts at "review-criticism," James Huneker wrote: "I saved these notices and I find that they read like the regulation bone-dry critique, with its spilth of adjectives and its amateurish omniscience. I had horse sense enough to avoid too many technical terms, and the criticisms that read the most reasonable are those in which the news element

¹Red, pp. ix-x.

²Music and Bad Manners, p. 206.

had closed their minds to new ideas. At the same time
devoted to concerts and recitals, as usual, and a
humorous irony. "I recognized the symptoms of the disease
upon me. I began to prefer Johann Sebastian Bach to
the last sonatas of Beethoven, and in place of the more
than Brahms."

He had been in the habit of devoting to himself
earlier, in which he had been, particularly,
You must realize now what your mind must be
symphony concert. It is impossible to understand
one's complete attention on the performance of a
long work except at those times when one has
or some new thing in the repertoire of a concert
strikes the ear. There is no such thing as a
is familiar, because it has occurred in so many
music before. . . . There are those who are
to admit, who can only concentrate on that which is
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Looking back on his earliest experience of music
criticism, James Mather wrote: "I saved these notions
and I find that they had like and regular development
criticism, with its application of subjective and the
omniscience. I had never been able to avoid
many technical terms, and the criticism that I had
most reasonable are those in which the knowledge

¹ Ibid., pp. ix-x.
² Music and the Mind, p. 206.

predominates. But the critical values! Oh!"¹ Van Vechten expressed a similar distaste for his own early work, seen in retrospect, by footnoting his last reference to "Music for Museums" as "the only section I can recall with any patience of a vile book (my first), Music After the Great War."² In 1924, however, as he granted permission to a younger generation of critics "to transfer what I said ten years ago about Stravinsky and Satie to Darius Milhaud and the young Italians," there was more reason to look back with Ernest Newman to the record of a critic's accomplishment: "It is, of course, some consolation to him to run over mentally the record of his colleagues and to recognize how much more of error they have talked than he, and how much less of truth."³

¹Huneker, Steeplejack, Part II, p. 199.

²Red, p. 8.

³Ernest Newman, A Musical Critic's Holiday (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1925), p. 14.

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¹ Hunter, Steepjack, 1924, p. 123.
² Ibid., p. 12.
³ Ernest Newman, A Critical History of
York: A. A. Knopf, 1925, p. 111.

CHAPTER III

LITERATURE

To appear sophisticated one may consult a sampling of the world's literature, art, and experience and construct from the sampling an eclectic personality to wear, like a fashionable suit of clothes dressing a wooden mannequin. The ultimate sophisticate, however, displays a prior personality which provides the appetite, directs the exploration, and assimilates its experiences as an eclectic expression of itself. It is this kind of sophistication which is met by the reader of Carl Van Vechten. In his essays one is invited to share the appetite, the exploration, and the discoveries. In his novels one meets the personality itself, extemporizing variations on the themes of its experience. Through them all appear the inferences and allusions of a writer secure in his background and taste, generously conceding to his reader a breadth and sophistication commensurate with his own. This is a considerable concession, since the random allusions and suggestions appear in what one well-prepared reviewer has called "journeys among things that can dwell only in the memories of a man who has known almost every interesting person from Hollywood to

To appear sophisticated one must have a sampling of the world's literature, art, and experience and must extract from the sampling an eclectic personality to use like a fashionable suit of clothes. The highest, however, is a prior personality which provides the economic, ethical, the exploration, and satisfaction in experience as an eclectic expression of itself. It is the kind of selection which is not of the order of mere selection. In his essays one is invited to share his personality, the exploration, and the discovery. In his essays one meets the personality itself, experiential and intellectual on the themes of life experience. Through them all we see the inference and alignment of a writer's response in his background and taste, generally according to the reader's breadth and sophistication of experience with his own. This is a considerable concession, since the writer's situations and suggestions appear in what the teller's period reviewer has called "journeys and things" and can dwell only in the recollections of a man who has known almost every interesting person from Hollywood to

Buda Pesth, and done nearly everything from attempting to collect 'The Folk Songs of Iowa' to discoursing upon fowls on the terrace of Windsor Castle and acting in the moving pictures in Nassau."¹

Sophistication and Decadence

It is significant that Van Vechten sparkles when he refers to the Eighteen-Eighties in Paris, for from his familiarity with that era of symbolism, mysticism, impressionism, vers libre, and decadence came much of his own artistic philosophy and style. The spark of revolt and experiment which resides in such names as Verlaine, Laforgue, Rimbaud, Huysmans, George Moore, Mallarmé, Renoir, Degas, Manet, and Monet would be sufficient to demand his attention and win his loyalty; indeed the circus character of their defiant revolt in life and art led him to characterize their "strange acrobatics" as "absinthe on the high wire."² But beneath

¹Hunter Stagg, "Some Random Essays Round Out Van Vechten's Literary Past," Richmond [Va.] Times-Dispatch (April 17, 1932), p. 6. In a 1923 letter to Emily Clark, then editor of the Reviewer, Van Vechten, commenting on her Southern contributors, asserted that "Hunter Stagg has the makings of the best critic in America. . . ." Emily Clark, Innocence Abroad, p. 136.

²Interpreters and Interpretations, p. 243. It is interesting that Van Vechten's most fantastic and unconventional hero, Gunnar O'Grady of Firecrackers, is by profession an acrobat.

the attraction of their novelty and color, Van Vechten caught the spirit and the mission of the French impressionists, and he reflected it in his own work to an American public which did not yet understand the movement in the arts from nineteenth-century sentimental exposition to twentieth-century aesthetic evocation. England had long before caught the virus through the aesthetic hedonism of Pater, Swinburne, the Pre-Raphaelites, and Oscar Wilde, but in America, despite the work of Huxley, Saltus, and a handful of others, the change came late and virtually unannounced. There is no manifesto in American literature to match Tristan Tzara's ironic "We want works, straightforward, strong, accurate, and forever not understood," or Pater's counsel "to burn with a hard, gem-like flame," or Flaubert's slavery to the inevitable word, or Wilde's monumental disdain for traditional habit in *Dorian Gray*: "I cannot repeat an emotion. No one can, except sentimentalists."

The ferment was delayed in America until our whole social and intellectual being became vulnerable to revolt and experiment. The second and third decades of our century provided the atmosphere, and American artists, finally yielding to a kind of artificial insemination, brought the impressionist, the symbolist, the aesthete, and the stylist into our strain. The germ

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The ferment was delayed in America until our whole social and intellectual being became unresponsive to revolt and experiment. The second and third decades of our century provided the atmosphere, and American artists, finally yielding to a kind of aesthetic insensibility, brought the Impressionists, the Symbolists, the Surrealists, and the Cubists into our sphere.

produced mutations as varied in appearance and color as Amy Lowell and the imagists, T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land, Gertrude Stein, Sherwood Anderson, Vachel Lindsay, Wallace Stevens, and William Faulkner.

Literary critics and historians, who could hardly ignore the inspiration of French free verse, have usually emphasized its influence while writing of our new poetry, sometimes obscuring its own original values in the process; but the same critics and historians, partially blinded by the issues which inspired the novels of social consciousness and by the disturbing personalities of individual egos in fiction, have discussed the relation of our prose to this Continental revolution in the arts largely in terms of one aspect: the vehicle of naturalism. Seldom is adequate recognition given to the influence of the symbolist, the impressionist, the craftsman devoted to the perfection of each individual effect in his art, and the aesthetic connoisseur devoted to the ultimate expression of his refinements in taste. These, of course, are disciplines leading to that enigmatic entity with the inadequate name--style. The result in our contemporary fiction is a generation of young novelists utilizing the accomplishments of their literary fathers, while only remotely aware of who their literary grandfathers were. If they are remotely aware, it is because some of their

produced mutations as varied in appearance and color as

any Lowell and the insects, the insects, the insects

land, Gertrude Stein, and the insects, the insects, the insects

Wallace Stevens, and the insects, the insects, the insects

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fathers themselves were. If their fathers were aware, a good part of that awareness came from the anecdotes, the cosmopolitan affinities, the critical appraisals, the familiar allusions, and the personal tastes of two Americans: James Huneker and Carl Van Vechten.

Huneker's contribution in this respect is undoubtedly the greater. It came earlier and is much the more substantial. Van Vechten's however, has its own importance in point of time and content. It coincided with a national revolt from nineteenth-century tradition and decorum, which, in the large, had met, if it had not diminished, Huneker's enthusiasm. It catered to an interest in the innovations of Continental culture growing out of our experience in World War I, and it drew its audience partly from the inclination of a disillusioned society to seek release in worldliness and sophistication. Huneker was perhaps too close to the ideal, a Parisian--or better, a true Cosmopolitan--in America; Van Vechten, who recorded his cultivated tastes and experiences with the exuberance of initiated youth and who found in New York lively competition for Old World manners and accomplishments, was always a cosmopolitan American in Paris.

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Excavations: Stylists, Strays,
and Oddities

Carl Van Vechten has always been an advance agent for the strange and unusual. His patronage of the French symbolist-impressionist artists and the Parisian scene is only one aspect of a writing career devoted to the introduction of significant novelty and rare individuality in literature. Through his companionable essays, his novels, and his personal endorsements to literary friends and acquaintances, he has sought a deserved audience for those artists whose eccentricity or departure from the traditional standards stood between them and the publisher or the reader, or both. There is in this aspect of Van Vechten's work both the honest satisfaction of championing a deserving cause and the perverse pleasure of turning up jolting contrasts to accepted literary fare. In each instance his reader senses the ascendancy of one purpose or the other, although both are always present. With so much critical writing confined to so comparatively few literary figures and with so much literary and "sub-literary" production to turn to, Van Vechten's consistent practice of searching out worthwhile oddities and diverting accomplishments might well be imitated by contemporary essayists. He has no fear of working the well dry.

Excellencies, Excellencies, Excellencies

and Objections

Gari Van Vechter has always been an advocate
agent for the strange and unusual. His knowledge of the
French symbolist-influenced artists and the Italian
scene is only one aspect of a wide range of knowledge
the introduction of significant new ideas and
quality in literature. His knowledge of the
his novels, and his personal acquaintance to literary
friends and acquaintances, he has made a valuable
audience for those artists whose contributions to literature
from the traditional standards need to be seen and
the publisher on the reader's behalf. There is in this
aspect of Van Vechter's work with the highest realization
of championing a deserving cause and the reviewer's pleasure
of turning up joint contrasts to be seen in literary circles.
In each instance his reader knows the necessity of the
purpose on the other, although both are always present.
With so much critical writing coming to be so generally
few literary figures and with so much literary and
literary" production to come to Van Vechter's attention
practice of searching out worthwhile authors and bringing
accomplishments might well be related to contemporary
essays. He has no fear of writing the well-known

"I can always look back and discover a new face," he wrote. "At ninety I expect to sit before my fire, dallying amorously with some overlooked masterpiece."¹

Van Vechten's most persistent service in this vein grew out of his early experience in pre-war Paris. Since their first meeting he has been a champion of Gertrude Stein. Miss Stein herself has, in her appreciation of Van Vechten's help, given him credit for her first publication in America. Actually, he did arrange for the appearance of Tender Buttons, her second book to be published here, but Three Lives appeared before he knew her. Once he had discovered Gertrude Stein and her work, however, he became her consistent supporter. He was responsible for her entry into several American magazines. He took her The Making of Americans to Alfred A. Knopf, his own publisher, in an attempt to secure its publication, and, in the words of Miss Stein herself, "It was he who in one of his early books printed as a motto [for his essay on Mary Garden in Interpreters and Interpretations] the device on Gertrude Stein's notepaper, A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose."² Through

¹Excavations, p. 47.

²Gertrude Stein, The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1933), p. 169.

"I can always look back and discover a new lesson," wrote. "At ninety I expect to sit before my life, basking amorously with some overlooked masterpiece." Van Vechten's most consistent activity in this vein grew out of his early experience in the literary world. Since their first meeting he had been a constant presence in Gertrude Stein's life, and it was his persistent solicitation of Van Vechten's help, given his position as first publisher in America, that resulted in the appearance of Under Western Eyes, his second book to be published here, but Three Lives appeared before he knew her. Once he had discovered Gertrude Stein and her work, however, he became her constant supporter. He was responsible for her entry into several American magazines. He took her Journal of American Literature to Alfred A. Knopf, his own publisher, in an attempt to secure its publication, and, in the words of the Stein herself, "it was he who in one of his early books ordered as a motto [for his essay on early Greek literature] and interpretations the device on Gertrude Stein's paper, A rose is a rose is a rose." 1

¹ Expositions, p. 47.

² Gertrude Stein, The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1937), p. 109.

the years when her work provoked either derision or polite bewilderment, Van Vechten, experienced as middleman between eccentric artist and reluctant public, kept it alive and in print. He squired her from Paris to Chicago for the performance of her opera (with music by Virgil Thomson), Four Saints in Three Acts, and guided her faithfully through her 1935 lecture tour of America. Since her death, he has assumed the task of editing Gertrude Stein, and much of her uncollected work has already been published with his own appreciative introduction. He has recently arranged for the publication of Miss Stein's very first book, Things As They Are, which had remained unpublished for nearly fifty years. In 1946 the Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein, prepared before but published after her death on July 27 of that year, was edited, with an introduction and notes, for Random House by Carl Van Vechten. In 1949, Rinehart published Last Operas and Plays, edited and with an introduction by Van Vechten. As her literary executor, he has devoted much of his energy since 1946 to completing our record of Gertrude Stein in print and on the stage.¹

¹Reporting a production of her Dr. Faustus Lights the Lights by The Living Theater on Dec. 2, 1951, (for which he contributed a program note), Van Vechten wrote me, "Dr. Faustus was much more interesting than I had hoped. The staging and the direction were excellent,

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In 1921, when the revival of Herman Melville was under way, Van Vechten, although he paid his tributes unstintingly to Moby Dick and the better-known novels,¹ wrote with sympathy and special appreciation of the later work of that author. It is not surprising that Pierre, The Confidence Man, Israel Potter, and the Piazza Tales are still being "discovered"; indeed, the scholarly critics are just now giving these unique productions the careful inspection they deserve.² It is remarkable, however, that a reader of 1921, in the face of the neglect shown them by other Melville enthusiasts, had the perspicacity to correctly assay their true nature and value.

the music [by Richard Banks] good, and the audience behaved as if it were used to seeing Stein every night and liking it."

¹In a review of Raymond Weaver's Herman Melville: Mariner and Mystic, for the Literary Review of the New York Evening Post (Dec. 31, 1921), Van Vechten wrote, ". . . it no longer can be said that no biography exists of the most brilliant figure in the history of our letters, the author of a book which far surpasses every other work created by an American from The Scarlet Letter to The Golden Bowl. For Moby Dick stands with the great classics of all times, with the tragedies of the Greeks, with Don Quixote, with Dante's Inferno and with Shakespeare's Hamlet." The review was reprinted by Grant Overton in When Winter Comes to Main Street (New York: George H. Doran, 1922), p. 328.

²William Braswell, who along with Henry A. Murray is currently the leading explorer of the ambiguous labyrinths in Pierre, wrote me after the publication of my study of the novel in The Western Humanities Review for Autumn, 1950, that "There's still a lot to be said about that book."

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In a review of Raymond Chandler's
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 the author of a book which has surpassed every other
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 of all times, with the exception of the Greek
 Quixote, with Dante's Inferno and a few others.
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 When Winter Comes to Main Street (New York: George
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William Maxwell, who also with
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"These books cannot be investigated by the aid of the critical jargon ordinarily applicable to works of art," he wrote in his essay on Melville; "they are the man himself."¹ "Readers who are satisfied to stop with Moby Dick will not understand his later life," he advised, "but those who go on. . . will get a clearer picture of his bitterness and unhappy striving."²

American readers knew next to nothing of an English writer named Ronald Firbank until Carl Van Vechten, inevitably attracted to a prose which went off like erratic firecrackers in splashes of brilliant illumination, celebrated his unique fiction.³ This was the sort of impish art which fitted no known category and defied successful imitation. So unique and esoteric as to be almost incoherent, Firbank's style still revealed to a discerning reader a substance and core as wry and ironic as its bewildering flashes of imagination. What stood

¹Excavations, p. 72.

²Ibid., p. 88.

³Firbank was available in America only to the few who had access to his London editions, until 1924 when Prancing Nigger was published here with the introduction by Van Vechten. Earlier Van Vechten essays in praise of Firbank appeared in March, 1922, and June, 1923, and are included in Excavations. The Book Review Digest mentions no review of Firbank before the 1924 American edition.

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¹ Excavations, p. 12.

² Ibid., p. 10.

³ Forman was available in America only to the
few who had access to his London edition, until 1925
when Transatlantic was published here with the first
edition by Van Nostrand. Forman Van Nostrand's edition in
praise of Forman appeared in 1925, and 1926.
1925, and are included in Excavations. The book review
Digest mentions no review of Forman before the 1925
American edition.

between writer and reader was this prodigious imagination which challenged the reader to provide his own light for the intervals of blackness between flashes. Firbank ignored them. The usual persistence of vision which could make smooth motion out of projected moving pictures failed the reader of Ronald Firbank. His sequences provided no consistent pattern, thriving instead on irregularity.

Van Vechten was delighted with such an art, impressed with the airy flippancy and the imaginative skill of this "glittering dragon-fly skimming over the sunlit literary garden, where almost all the other creatures crawl."¹ He did what he could to share his pleasure with others. Over the objections of H. L. Mencken, he convinced Emily Clark, then editor of The Reviewer, that she should publish Firbank. He wrote encomiastic reviews which almost matched the jaunty temperament of Firbank's work. One described how on mail days traffic would be suspended around the Holliday Bookshop owing to crowds trying to get Firbank's books. According to Grant Richards, Firbank's publisher, that author took it literally in England, wrote Van Vechten, and received a reply "to the effect that if he would go

¹Ibid., p. 174.

between writer and reader was this: the writer, who
 which challenged the reader to provide his own light for
 the intervals of darkness between lines. The writer
 ignored them, the usual persistence of vision which
 could make smooth nothing out of projected moving pictures
 failed the reader of Robert Lynd's. His sentences
 provided no consistent pattern, nothing insisted on
 irregularity.

Van Vechten was delighted with this and
 impressed with the airy flippancy and the imaginative
 skill of this "littering English" which seemed to be
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 temperament of Lynd's work. The reviewer was by
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 Bookshop owing to crowds trying to get Lynd's book.
 According to Grant Tinker, Lynd's publisher, that
 author took is literally to heart, even Van Vechten
 and received a reply "to the effect that it was not to be

to New York many thousands would flock to his lectures and many scores would meet him at the pier. And, Van Vechten added, if he would but publish his books in America he would sell thousands. . . ."¹ In 1924, Brentano's edition of Firbank's Prancing Nigger carried a preface by Van Vechten, who had suggested the title. While the reception of Firbank's peculiar genius will never match Van Vechten's capricious predictions, his reputation continues to grow today. The recent publication of two Firbank volumes, Five Novels (1949) and Three Novels (1951), by New Directions has introduced his work to a second generation of readers.

In 1922, Carl Van Vechten could write with more truth than modesty, "With my own hands I have exhumed the skeleton of Edgar Saltus, arranging its fantastic contours in a corner of my museum, with the satisfactory result that the author of the Anatomy of Negation has become a favorite with 'collectors,' and is even read belatedly by a few adventurous spirits."² The reference is to his 1918 essay on Saltus which appeared originally in The Merry-Go-Round and later joined the literary

¹Grant Richards, Author Hunting (New York: Coward-McCann, 1934), p. 256.

²Excavations, p. 129.

to New York many thousands would flock to his lectures
and many scores would meet him at the club. Van
Vechten added, if he would not mind his country
America he would well understand. . . . In 1922, when
Tano's edition of Richard's Journal was
preface by Van Vechten, who had suggested the title.
While the reception of Richard's Journal was
never match Van Vechten's enthusiastic reception, his
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in The Merry-Go-Round and later joined the Journal.

¹ Grant Richards, Journal, London: Richard's Journal, 1922.
Coward-McCann, 1922, p. 132.
² Excavations, p. 132.

advocacies of Excavations. Van Vechten's figure of speech is accurate despite the fact that Saltus, who died in 1921, was still alive when the article was written. Saltus had played almost all his literary scenes off-stage. The brief vogue which his essays and novels enjoyed at the end of the century was due chiefly to their sensationalism and the contemporary legends of their author's own bohemian existence. Thereafter they lived only in the respect of a cultivated few who kept the faith in silence. James Huneker and Vance Thompson both considered doing a definitive article on Saltus, but the silence persisted until Van Vechten revealed the lush colors that lay under twenty years of dust.¹ What he had discovered was not the great American master of prose, but a strikingly singular figure in our literature, virtually the only one whose work carried the genuine stamp of French impressionism and decadence in the contemporaneous American era.²

Style is both the strength and the weakness of Saltus' work, for at its best it is sensitive, suggestive,

¹ Ibid., p. 91n.

² "He is almost the sole illustrator in American letters of the fashion known in Europe as fin-de-siècle." Clarence Gohdes, "The Later Nineteenth Century," The Literature of the American People, Arthur H. Quinn, ed. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1951), p. 741.

amazingly careful expression, while in its self-conscious excess it caricatures itself. It often shrouds its subject in a suffusion of color and sensation, appearing to exist merely for the sake of its own effects and artifice. This preoccupation with style has led some critics to dispense with Saltus as a futile, isolated eccentric, or to excoriate him, as Oscar Cargill has done, by labelling him "the unrivalled champion of bad taste, the promoter of frippery, the hen-feathered knight of vulgarity," who "carefully selected from the booty of the whole world only the inutile and fantastic to dump on our shores."¹ Such a pronouncement is not without its application to the more florid and involuted aspects of Saltus' writing, but it denies the place of anything "inutile and fantastic" in our literature. It ignores the impelling presence of the art-for-art's-sake principle in one of its earliest American exponents, and it glosses with abuse the introduction of Continental fin-de-siècle art to a country which, like the natives of Maple Valley, Iowa, in The Tattooed Countess, understood the French term as roughly equivalent to "the latest thing."

Van Vechten's acceptance of Edgar Saltus is avowedly one of personal taste, a taste acquired from

¹Oscar Cargill, Intellectual America, p. 474.

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 to exist merely for the sake of its own effects and
 effects. This preoccupation with style has led some
 critics to disagree with it as a style, and to
 eccentric, or at least as a style, and to
 more, by labeling it "style" and "style" and "style"
 taste, the presence of which, the day-to-day and night
 of vigour, "who" "carefully selected from the body of
 the whole world only the finest and finest to show
 on our shores." And a phenomenon is not without
 its application to the more liberal and intelligent aspects
 of nature, which, but it denies the place of anything
 "innate and fantastic" in our literature. At times
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 in one of its earliest artistic movements, and it gives
 with those the introduction of Caribbean and the
 art to a country which, like the natives of the Pacific
 low, in the Tattooed Countess, understood the French
 term as possibly equivalent to "the latest thing."

Van Vechten's acceptance of the term is
 avowedly one of personal taste; a taste supplied from

sources similar to those of Saltus. It is this affinity, however, which allows Van Vechten to vouch for the authenticity of the earlier stylist, to review him in his context of time and literary milieu. While his praise of Saltus is probably inordinate by most critical standards, it is by no means blind. Without minimizing the personal appeal Saltus' prose had for him, he could admit, "At his worst--and his worst could be monstrous!--garbed fantastically in purple patches and gaudy rags, he wallows in muddy puddles of Burgundy and gold dust."¹

It was the same champion of the misunderstood and undersung who called for contemporary recognition of Henry Blake Fuller, whom he found "perhaps not the greatest of living American novelists, but certainly one of the most original and distinguished."² Fuller was not without other champions; Robert Morss Lovett, H. L. Mencken, Percival Pollard, and Huneker were some who had shown their appreciation; but Van Vechten's appraisal was a broadside estimate calculated to stimulate a wider interest in an artist who had told him further novels were unlikely: they took too much effort and gave too

¹The Merry-Go-Round, p. 49.

²Excavations, p. 129.

address similar to those of others. It is this similarity,
 however, which allows the reviewer to point out the weakness-
 tially of the earlier style, to review him in his own
 text of time and literary style. While the style of
 Selous is probably indicated by some critical standard,
 it is by no means clear. It is a mistake to say that
 appeal Selous' prose had for him, as some would say,
 his words--and his words could be described as--
 fantastically in simple phrases and good words; he follows
 in muddy puddles of ambiguity and gold dust.
 It was the same conception of the character of the
 undertaking was called for a contemporary recognition of
 Henry Blake Walcott, who is found to have not the
 greatest of living American novelists, but certainly one
 of the most original and distinguished. It is not
 not without other examples; Robert Frost, for instance,
 Newman, Fervent Pollock, and others, who have and have
 shown their appreciation of the very best of the
 was a roadside estimate assigned to estimate a writer
 interest in an artist who had told the further details
 were unlikely: they took too much effort, and gave too

¹The Merry-go-round, p. 12.

²Excavations, p. 123.

little return. Fuller is seen as a disappointed cosmopolitan, "mired in Chicago," preferring Italy and writing sensitively and effectively of both. Quoting examples, Van Vechten pointed to Fuller's civilized sense of humor, delicate, polished, and sufficiently ironic to make a maximum of effect with a minimum of effort.

Fuller's touch is like the lifting of an eyebrow, the quick flick of an ash from a cigarette, a gentle tapping of a boot on a not too resounding pavement. A sensitive reader will perhaps react to these peaceful signals more graciously than to the more emphatic outcries of a Theodore Dreiser. Fuller's humor never exacts a great guffaw, or his pathos a flood of tears. He is quietly amusing and gently melancholy.¹

Twenty years later, Alfred Kazin, placing Fuller among the early "metropolitan realists" in his survey of modern American prose, On Native Grounds, dwelt on the same qualities that set Fuller apart from the others in his group. To Kazin, "the gentle little man who abominated Chicago" had an "exquisite soul," the mark of "a graceful and impressionistic artist" who "could write skillfully, with a lambent touch that mocked his own bitterness; his flip style and loosely sardonic craftsmanship even anticipated the sophisticated novel of the nineteen-twenties."²

¹ Excavations, p. 136.

² Alfred Kazin, On Native Grounds (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1942), p. 25.

little reform. Fuller is seen as a distinguished young
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 Van Vechten pointed to Fuller's "delicate" sense of humor
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Fuller's touch is like the lifting of a veil,
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 his flip style and loosely academic craftsmanship even
 anticipated the sophisticated novel of the thirties
 twenties."

¹ Excavations, p. 136.
² Alfred Kazin, On Edwin Newman (New York: New
 nal & Hitchcock, 1932), p. 23.

Not all Van Vechten's literary excavations have a sense of mission. More consistent with his own random style and whimsicality are the essays which turn up romantic figures with the appeal of spirit, dash, and nonchalant accomplishment. In approaching the novels of Ouida, for instance, he writes that he was "weary of modern fiction, tainted with Freud and Fabre, weary of James Joyce and Dorothy Richardson and D. H. Lawrence, weary of Romain Rolland and his quest for a perfect world."¹ The list might be extended at some length. The mood must be a familiar one to many a bookman. Marcel Proust and Thomas Wolfe, along with Rolland, are each capable of bringing it on alone if taken at a gulp. Two courses are open to the victim, an escape from books or an escape in books. Van Vechten took the latter. "It has long been a contention of mine," he wrote with a bland lack of qualification, "that middle-class life is as dull in art as it is in reality. Ouida, seemingly, agreed with me."² Philip Thicknesse, Matthew Phipps Shiel, and the other writers whose company he sought in such a mood also agreed with him.

¹Ibid., p. 48.

²Ibid., p. 54.

Not all Van Vechten's literary observations have a sense of mission. More consistent with his own random style and whimsicality are the essays which turn up romantic figures with the appeal of spirit, heart, and nonchalant accomplishment. In appraising the novels of Ouida, for instance, he writes that he was "weary of modern fiction, clogged with trend and fabric, weary of James Joyce and Dorothy Richardson and D. H. Lawrence, weary of Roman Rolland and his quest for a perfect world." The list might be extended at some length. The most must be a familiar one to many a bookman. Marcel Proust and Thomas Wolfe, along with Rolland, are each capable of bringing it on alone if taken at a gulp. Two courses are open to the victim, an escape from books or an escape in books. Van Vechten took the latter. "It has long been a contention of mine," he wrote with a bland face of qualification, "that middle-class life is as dull in art as it is in reality. Ouida, seemingly, agreed with me."² Philip Richardson, Matthew Rippe Shiel, and the other writers whose company he sought in such a mood also agreed with him.

¹ Ibid., p. 19.

² Ibid., p. 21.

The well-adjusted superman, the superior being in mufti, has always been a favorite of Van Vechten's. The penchant for such fictional figures, cast in real or fanciful molds, may be traced back to his boyhood adoration of Horatio Alger, Jr., and Ingersoll Lockwood in Cedar Rapids. Certainly there is a pattern to be discerned in his enthusiasm for Ouida's daring guardsmen, the eighteenth-century Philip Thicknesse, "an irascible and cultivated English gentleman-adventurer with a kind of genius for expressing himself,"¹ the world-conquering Richard Hogarth of M. P. Shiel's Lord of the Sea, the dauntless, intrepid Gerald of Elinor Wylie's Jennifer Lorn, and his own Gunnar O'Grady of Firecrackers. In a sense which must wait the later treatment of his novels to be fully explored, Peter Whiffle and Campaspe Lorillard can be added to the list.

Van Vechten wrote affectionately of all these entertaining figures. In the case of Miss Wylie's Jennifer Lorn, he encountered the naïve Jennifer and her peerless Gerald set in an urbane, delightfully ironic and subtle prose that enhanced their appeal immeasurably. The combination overwhelmed him. He announced its perfection to every available ear. Besides talking and

¹In the Garret, p. 48.

The well-adjusted organism, the successful being in art, has always been a favorite of the teachers. The penchant for such fictional figures, once in fact or fanciful molds, may be traced back to the boyhood adoration of Horatio Alger, Jr., and ingeniously borrowed in Cedar Rapids. Certainly there is a pattern to be discerned in his enthusiasm for Ouida's daring adventures, his eighteenth-century Philip Thicknesse, "an irascible and cultivated English gentleman-adventurer with a kind of genius for expressing himself,"¹ the vivid-convincing Richard Hogarth of W. F. Thel's Lord of the Sea, and countless, intrepid Gerald of Alison's Jennifer born, and his own Gerald of the Mountains, in a sense which must wait the later treatment of his novels to be fully explored. Later still, as the years unfolded, can be added to the list, Van Vechten wrote W. F. Thel's Lord of the Sea entertaining figures. In the case of Alison's Jennifer born, he encountered the native Jennifer and her peerless Gerald set in an urban, delightfully ironic and subtle prose that enhanced their appeal. The combination overwhelmed him. He announced the portion to every available ear. Heated talking and

¹In the Parrot, p. 48.

writing of his enthusiasm, he "led a torch-light procession through the streets of New York" to honor the appearance of the novel.¹ Elinor Wylie wrote gratefully in the copy she gave him: "For Carl Van Vechten, without whom this book would never have been read."

Many others might write similar inscriptions on their work, for Van Vechten has been New York's town crier on numerous occasions when personal enthusiasm has enlisted his voluntary support. He read the poems of Langston Hughes, whom he had met at an N.A.A.C.P. benefit party in Harlem, and submitted them to A. A. Knopf. They were published as The Weary Blues. Hughes reciprocated by supplying the snatches of blues for Nigger Heaven, and by appreciative mention of Van Vechten's many services in his autobiography, The Big Sea. Alfred Knopf often relied on Van Vechten's judgment entirely in decisions about manuscripts, listing among writers the latter recommended to him Negroes James Weldon Johnson, Rudolph Fisher, Nella Larsen, Chester Himes, and Hughes; artist and writer Miguel Covarrubias; poet Wallace Stevens; and Neith Boyce, Isa Glenn, M. P. Shiel, H. B. Fuller, and Arthur Machen.²

¹Emily Clark, Innocence Abroad, p. 141.

²Alfred A. Knopf, "Reminiscences of Hergesheimer, Van Vechten, and Mencken," Yale University Library Gazette, XXIV (April, 1950), pp. 156-157.

writing of his enthusiasm, he had a long-lying reaction
through the streets of New York to honor the appearance
of the novel.¹ Simon said that he was in the city
and gave him: "For that I am grateful, Simon, who said
book would never have been read."

Many others, like the little illustrations on
their work, for the Webster has been a long time
order on numerous occasions when Simon and I
has enlisted his voluntary support. He has been
of Larson Hughes, who he had met at an A.A.A. meeting
benefit party in Harlem, and submitted them to me.
Knopf. They were published in the New Yorker. Hughes
responsible by supplying the sketches of these for
Nigger Heaven, and by appreciative mention of Van Vechten's
ten's many services in his autobiography, *Days of 1920*.
Alfred Knopf often relied on Van Vechten's judgment
entirely in decisions about manuscripts, making many
writers the latter recommended to him. Among these
Weldon Johnson, Richard Wright, Nella Larsen, Langston
Hughes, and Hughes; artist and writer Alfred Gottschalk;
poet Wallace Stevens; and John Berryman, Jay Wright, J. P.
Shel, H. C. Fuller, and Arthur Ross.

¹ Emily Blum, *Imaginations*, p. 111.
² Alfred A. Knopf, "Contributions of the
Van Vechten, and Kenneth, Yale University Library
XXIV (April, 1950), pp. 150-151.

As a comfortable supplement to the advocacies of others who had pleased him, a number of Van Vechten's literary essays center about no one topic but move easily through a series of points in focus, wandering with amiable direction. One, "The Holy Jumpers" from In the Garret, is a three-in-one offering of the varied Van Vechten method. Opening with the author's consideration of personal pleasures and thrills, it moves to a comfortable, vivid description--appreciation of Nassau and vicinity in the Bahamas, and finally leaps into a frenzied account in staccato, impressionistic prose of the evangelistic fervor of those islands' Negro Holy Jumpers. His talent for light, entertaining, and informative essays is demonstrated by "On Visiting Fashionable Places Out of Season" and "A Note on Dedications," the opening and closing offerings in Excavations, both of which display the bookman who composed them, but both of which are characteristically free of the bookish restraint and stiltedness that so often accompany such essays.

In all of Van Vechten's essays is the flavor of a distinct literary personality. His discourse allows no separation from its author, for it follows the whim of writer rather than reader with only such unbending as comes naturally from the amiability of the former.

It maintains a quality of detached individuality which forever leads its reader towards a complete rapport but persistently eludes him in some sophisticated or allusive maneuver. The writer refuses to stand still and remains beyond the reach of traditional demands on literary criticism. Much of the strength and appeal of his writing dwells in this quality, for, as one reader has observed, "To dismiss him airily with some remark about pastiche means nothing, for Mr. Van Vechten has already dismissed you with an airiness that it will take you much practice to achieve."¹

Transition to Novelist

In his valedictory to music criticism, Van Vechten referred to himself as "a writer who apparently at heart was always creative rather than critical."² The assertion is borne out by his earlier writing and indicates the comparative ease with which he underwent the metamorphosis from critic to novelist. The groundwork for his fiction is evident in his essays. A number of the essays written in the year preceding Peter Whiffle, his first novel, were

¹"Carl Van Vechten Collects Some Literary Strays," New York Times Book Review (Jan. 10, 1926), p. 5.

²Red, p. xvii.

It maintains a quality of unbroken objectivity, which
 forever leads the reader towards a more complete
 perception of the truth. It is not, as is often
 maintained, the writer's task to show skill and
 beyond the reach of critical analysis on literary
 criticism. Much of the strength and appeal of his
 writing dwells in this quality, and one who has
 observed, "The writer is a man who is not content
 with the mere mechanical, but who is always
 dismissed you with an air of having done his
 practice to achieve."

Transition to Novelty

In his introduction to the novel, the writer
 referred to himself as "a writer who is not content
 with the mere mechanical, but who is always
 is borne out by his earlier writing and his attitude
 comparative ease with which he undertakes the
 from critic to novelist. The groundwork for this
 is evident in his essays. A number of the essays
 in the year preceding Testament, his first novel, were

New York Times Book Review (Jan. 10, 1926), p. 2.
Leahy Van Vochten collected some literary essays.

frankly experiments in narrative. The creation of vivid description and atmosphere had become more and more the mark of his sketches. It is worthy of notice that the writing career of James Huneker followed a similar pattern, except that the short fictions published with his critical essays were more clearly set apart, and his first novel, Painted Veils (written when Huneker was in his sixties) was also his last.

The transition was also cushioned by the presentation of two books about cats, The Tiger in the House in 1920, and Lords of the Housetops, a collection of cat stories which he edited in 1921. The first of these was a remarkable volume, an encyclopedia of cat-lore that stands by itself as the most complete and indisputably literary study of its subject in our literature. The book has been reissued four times since its first publication, its quaintness and readability making it the standard favorite of cat-lovers for two generations, as comprehensive and entertaining for readers of its 1950 edition as it was for its English and American audience in 1920. In its thorough consideration of feline manner and psychology, it was especially germane to the enigmatic, graceful philosophy of individual detachment which was to command the sophisticated characters and

Frankly experienced in narrative. The question of vivid description and atmosphere had become more and more the mark of his sketches. It is a sort of notice that the writing career of James Thurmer followed a similar pattern, except that the short fiction published with his critical essays were more slowly kept apart, and his first novel, Walden, was written when Thurmer was in his sixties (was it not?). The transition was also gradual in the case of the publication of the books Walden and Walden in 1920, and Walden of the Walden, a collection of stories which he edited in 1921. The first of these was a remarkable volume, an encyclopaedia of the best stands by itself as the best collection of independently literary study of the subject in the literature. The book has been released four times since its first publication, its popularity and readability being its standard favorite of out-lovers for two generations, as comprehensive and entertaining for readers of the 1950 edition as it was for the earlier and earlier editions in 1920. In its thorough consideration of the nature and psychology, it was especially valuable to the artistic, graceful philosophy of individual human beings which was to command the sophisticated character and

situations of his novels, and which was to be pointedly symbolized in Peter Whiffle by the austere self-containment and complete subjective unity of the cat. His preface for Svend Fleuron's Kittens in 1922 and the simple, sensitive tribute to his own Persian in Feathers, published as a Random House Quarto in 1930, were to round out the literary contributions of puss's most articulate student and champion in America.

Fashionable Novels: Peter Whiffle

Van Vechten published seven novels with almost annual regularity before he retired his pen in favor of his camera. Like the criticism that went before them, they shocked some, titillated others, and charmed many. The latter group was all the audience he was concerned with. All he desired when a new book of his was given life was "that a special group of people who may exist in any part of the world shall say with a true pleasure and anticipation: 'Here is another Van Vechten.'"¹

Peter Whiffle: His Life and Works, conceived according to its author in the winter of 1920 and brought to the public in 1922, gave such pleasure to many. Its novelty as a half-valid biography was engaging, its scenes were romantic and worldly, its style was the

¹Emily Clark, Innocence Abroad, p. 143.

situations of his novels, and which was to be a symbolized in Peter Whiffle by the author's self-contradiction and complete subjective unity of the act. His preface for *Grand Illusions* in 1922 and the sensitive tribute to his own work in 1923, were published as a handout from the library collection of books and the student and champion in America.

Fashionable novels: Peter Whiffle

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Peter Whiffle: his life and work, continued

According to its author in the winter of 1920 and brought to the public in 1922, gave such pleasure to many, its novelty as a half-veiled biography was emphasized. Its scenes were romantic and veridical, its style was that

engaging union of ease and grace, beauty, wit, and knowledge, and it carried its burden with a lightness unique in any artistic performance. "The Bookman's Guide to Fiction" for June, 1922, although it inappropriately employed billboard English, indicated the book's impact, and, unconsciously, explained it in terms of contrast. Peter Whiffle is recommended with the comment, "Enthralling truth beneath the cosmetics of fiction. Gloriously real and written well." The same list says of John Dos Passos' Three Soldiers merely, "Three malcontents in a vivid war setting."¹

The phrase "gloriously real," one gathers, refers to the presence in the novel of persons who, as the book's dust jacket puts it, "appear under their own names" while "others wear thin epithetical masks." This same jacket begins its blurb with the challenging query, "Who was Peter Whiffle?" The question may have seemed a vital one then, but it has become largely rhetorical now, without minimizing the quality or interest of the novel at all. Possibly it enhances it for readers who find in the duet of Carl, the biographer, and Peter, the subject, a kind of Jekyll and Hyde artistic schizophrenia, the former recording sympathetically

¹ Bookman, LV (June, 1922), 414.

engaging union of ease and grace, beauty, wit, and knowledge, and it carried its reader with a lightness unique in any artistic performance. "The Bookman's Guide to Fiction" for June, 1932, p. 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100, 101, 102, 103, 104, 105, 106, 107, 108, 109, 110, 111, 112, 113, 114, 115, 116, 117, 118, 119, 120, 121, 122, 123, 124, 125, 126, 127, 128, 129, 130, 131, 132, 133, 134, 135, 136, 137, 138, 139, 140, 141, 142, 143, 144, 145, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150, 151, 152, 153, 154, 155, 156, 157, 158, 159, 160, 161, 162, 163, 164, 165, 166, 167, 168, 169, 170, 171, 172, 173, 174, 175, 176, 177, 178, 179, 180, 181, 182, 183, 184, 185, 186, 187, 188, 189, 190, 191, 192, 193, 194, 195, 196, 197, 198, 199, 200, 201, 202, 203, 204, 205, 206, 207, 208, 209, 210, 211, 212, 213, 214, 215, 216, 217, 218, 219, 220, 221, 222, 223, 224, 225, 226, 227, 228, 229, 230, 231, 232, 233, 234, 235, 236, 237, 238, 239, 240, 241, 242, 243, 244, 245, 246, 247, 248, 249, 250, 251, 252, 253, 254, 255, 256, 257, 258, 259, 260, 261, 262, 263, 264, 265, 266, 267, 268, 269, 270, 271, 272, 273, 274, 275, 276, 277, 278, 279, 280, 281, 282, 283, 284, 285, 286, 287, 288, 289, 290, 291, 292, 293, 294, 295, 296, 297, 298, 299, 300, 301, 302, 303, 304, 305, 306, 307, 308, 309, 310, 311, 312, 313, 314, 315, 316, 317, 318, 319, 320, 321, 322, 323, 324, 325, 326, 327, 328, 329, 330, 331, 332, 333, 334, 335, 336, 337, 338, 339, 340, 341, 342, 343, 344, 345, 346, 347, 348, 349, 350, 351, 352, 353, 354, 355, 356, 357, 358, 359, 360, 361, 362, 363, 364, 365, 366, 367, 368, 369, 370, 371, 372, 373, 374, 375, 376, 377, 378, 379, 380, 381, 382, 383, 384, 385, 386, 387, 388, 389, 390, 391, 392, 393, 394, 395, 396, 397, 398, 399, 400, 401, 402, 403, 404, 405, 406, 407, 408, 409, 410, 411, 412, 413, 414, 415, 416, 417, 418, 419, 420, 421, 422, 423, 424, 425, 426, 427, 428, 429, 430, 431, 432, 433, 434, 435, 436, 437, 438, 439, 440, 441, 442, 443, 444, 445, 446, 447, 448, 449, 450, 451, 452, 453, 454, 455, 456, 457, 458, 459, 460, 461, 462, 463, 464, 465, 466, 467, 468, 469, 470, 471, 472, 473, 474, 475, 476, 477, 478, 479, 480, 481, 482, 483, 484, 485, 486, 487, 488, 489, 490, 491, 492, 493, 494, 495, 496, 497, 498, 499, 500, 501, 502, 503, 504, 505, 506, 507, 508, 509, 510, 511, 512, 513, 514, 515, 516, 517, 518, 519, 520, 521, 522, 523, 524, 525, 526, 527, 528, 529, 530, 531, 532, 533, 534, 535, 536, 537, 538, 539, 540, 541, 542, 543, 544, 545, 546, 547, 548, 549, 550, 551, 552, 553, 554, 555, 556, 557, 558, 559, 560, 561, 562, 563, 564, 565, 566, 567, 568, 569, 570, 571, 572, 573, 574, 575, 576, 577, 578, 579, 580, 581, 582, 583, 584, 585, 586, 587, 588, 589, 590, 591, 592, 593, 594, 595, 596, 597, 598, 599, 600, 601, 602, 603, 604, 605, 606, 607, 608, 609, 610, 611, 612, 613, 614, 615, 616, 617, 618, 619, 620, 621, 622, 623, 624, 625, 626, 627, 628, 629, 630, 631, 632, 633, 634, 635, 636, 637, 638, 639, 640, 641, 642, 643, 644, 645, 646, 647, 648, 649, 650, 651, 652, 653, 654, 655, 656, 657, 658, 659, 660, 661, 662, 663, 664, 665, 666, 667, 668, 669, 670, 671, 672, 673, 674, 675, 676, 677, 678, 679, 680, 681, 682, 683, 684, 685, 686, 687, 688, 689, 690, 691, 692, 693, 694, 695, 696, 697, 698, 699, 700, 701, 702, 703, 704, 705, 706, 707, 708, 709, 710, 711, 712, 713, 714, 715, 716, 717, 718, 719, 720, 721, 722, 723, 724, 725, 726, 727, 728, 729, 730, 731, 732, 733, 734, 735, 736, 737, 738, 739, 740, 741, 742, 743, 744, 745, 746, 747, 748, 749, 750, 751, 752, 753, 754, 755, 756, 757, 758, 759, 760, 761, 762, 763, 764, 765, 766, 767, 768, 769, 770, 771, 772, 773, 774, 775, 776, 777, 778, 779, 780, 781, 782, 783, 784, 785, 786, 787, 788, 789, 790, 791, 792, 793, 794, 795, 796, 797, 798, 799, 800, 801, 802, 803, 804, 805, 806, 807, 808, 809, 810, 811, 812, 813, 814, 815, 816, 817, 818, 819, 820, 821, 822, 823, 824, 825, 826, 827, 828, 829, 830, 831, 832, 833, 834, 835, 836, 837, 838, 839, 840, 841, 842, 843, 844, 845, 846, 847, 848, 849, 850, 851, 852, 853, 854, 855, 856, 857, 858, 859, 860, 861, 862, 863, 864, 865, 866, 867, 868, 869, 870, 871, 872, 873, 874, 875, 876, 877, 878, 879, 880, 881, 882, 883, 884, 885, 886, 887, 888, 889, 890, 891, 892, 893, 894, 895, 896, 897, 898, 899, 900, 901, 902, 903, 904, 905, 906, 907, 908, 909, 910, 911, 912, 913, 914, 915, 916, 917, 918, 919, 920, 921, 922, 923, 924, 925, 926, 927, 928, 929, 930, 931, 932, 933, 934, 935, 936, 937, 938, 939, 940, 941, 942, 943, 944, 945, 946, 947, 948, 949, 950, 951, 952, 953, 954, 955, 956, 957, 958, 959, 960, 961, 962, 963, 964, 965, 966, 967, 968, 969, 970, 971, 972, 973, 974, 975, 976, 977, 978, 979, 980, 981, 982, 983, 984, 985, 986, 987, 988, 989, 990, 991, 992, 993, 994, 995, 996, 997, 998, 999, 1000.

but honestly the excess and folly of the latter. For Peter is the author who never wrote a book, the heady pursuer of the strange, the occult, the remote, the exquisite, the aesthetic moment, and the perpetual escape from encroaching boredom: in short, a calculated distortion of the incubi which beckoned to Carl Van Vechten.¹

Such a reading is, indeed, supported almost literally in some respects. On pages 147 and 148, Carl discovers Peter attired in "a white silk shirt, a tie of Chinese blue brocade, clasped with a black opal" and wearing as a ring "an amethyst intaglio, with Leda and the Swan as its subject." Mabel Dodge Luhan recalls that "Carl's soft silk shirt had turned-back cuffs. . . buttoned with bold links that had some dull, half-precious stones embedded sleepily there in the shining metal. . . . He wore a merry intaglio depicting Leda and the swan, set in a gold ring. . . and his neckties came from Fifth Avenue shops."² Later in the novel,

¹Neith Boyce, an intimate friend and companion both in this country and abroad, wrote Van Vechten in an undated letter of 1922 of both the autobiographical representation and the elusive personality of the novel: ". . . it is more you than anything else of yours I've read, and therefore has charm and something else which I've never decided just what it is."

²Movers and Shakers, p. 16.

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 Chinese pine brocade, clasped with a...
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Boyer and...
 2

Carl explains that Peter gave the ring to him, but it seems certain that Mabel Dodge, who appears in the book as Edith Dale, was describing Van Vechten at an earlier date than 1917 or 1918. The death of Peter, announced in the opening sentence as occurring almost unnoticed in the winter of 1919-1920, would represent Carl's decision to write Peter's book, ending his fruitless existence in the process. Van Vechten's whole preface, in which he explains his relation to Peter and his position as literary executor, assumes the flavor of clever ambiguity, and the final dialogue in Peter's (therefore Carl's) New York apartment, climaxed by his quiet cessation, takes on added strength and appropriateness. Appealing as such an interpretation might be, however, account must be taken of two references to Peter in previous works; in the essay of Philip Thicknesse (Nov., 1918): "Perhaps when I am through with my books Peter Whiffle, who now ardently desires my set of Lafcadio Hearn, may be browsing in other fields," and in "La Tigresse" of In the Garret (Feb., 1919): "I cannot get along without knowing Peter Whiffle."

Regardless of Peter's role as shadow or substance, the tale of his feverish, scattershot existence is unique in American literature. That it would not be unique in French or English literature is an indication of a good

Carl explains that Peter gave the ring to him, and it seems certain that Marcel Proust, who appears in the book as Edith Pate, was describing an occasion at an earlier date than 1917 or 1918. The death of Peter, announced in the opening sentence as occurring at the age of thirty in the winter of 1919-1920, would represent Carl's decision to write Peter's book, leaving his friends to exchange in the process. Van Vechten's explanation in which he explains his relation to Peter and his position as literary executor, assumes the literary clever ambiguity, and the final disclosure in Peter's (therefore Carl's) New York apartment, explained by his quiet cessation, taken on added strength and appropriateness. Appearing as such an interpretation, it is, however, account must be taken of the relationship to Peter in previous works; in the essay of Philip Henschen (Nov., 1918): "Perhaps when I am through with my books Peter Whiffle, who now ardently desires my set of last radio Hertz, may be browsing in other fields," and in "La Tigresse" or In the Garden (Feb., 1919): "I cannot get along without knowing Peter Whiffle." Rogardness of Peter's role as shadow or presence the tale of his feverish, consciousness existence is united in American literature. That it would not be unique in French or English literature is an indication of a good

deal of its significance in ours. J. K. Huysmans' A Rebours and Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray are clearly step-father and half-brother, respectively, to Peter Whiffle.

The relation to A Rebours is the more secure of the two, for unlike Wilde, Huysmans and Van Vechten both observe their decadent hero with sympathetic detachment. They identify themselves only with the attractions of their heroes, not with the heroes themselves, in this manner emerging allied to but separate from them. With this superior sophistication they can satirize without choosing sides; they can indulge themselves without abandoning themselves to that indulgence. Huysmans accomplishes this more subtly, Van Vechten more cleverly, but each avoids the passionate self-involvement that gives The Picture of Dorian Gray its brilliant but hideous genius. The Frenchman and the American wrote parody, the Englishman tragedy.

A catalogue of the similarities between Huysmans' hero and Peter Whiffle illustrates the original treatment accorded the latter. Both seek, through strange byways, ultimate sensation and revelation, but Des Esseintes desires the experience for its own sake, while Peter wishes to utilize it in art. Des Esseintes, desiring to visit England, does so by intellectually detaching

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 the two, for unlike Wilde, Rebours and his father both
 observe their decadent hero with sympathy and admiration.
 They identify themselves only with the attitude of
 their heroes, not with the hero himself. In this
 manner emerging allied to our English hero, the English
 this superior sophistication they can see in the French
 choosing sides; they can find themselves in the
 abandoning themselves to that indulgence. Rebours
 accomplishes this more subtly, and without more directly
 but each avoids the passionate self-indulgence that
 gives the picture of French life its brilliant but shallow
 genius. The Frenchman and the American whole person
 the Englishman tragedy.

A catalogue of the characteristics between Rebours
 hero and Peter Whiffle illustrates the original treatment
 accorded the latter. Both seek, through artistic means,
 ultimate sensation and revelation, but Rebours
 desires the experience for its own sake, while Peter
 wishes to utilize it in art. The difference, leading to
 visit England, does so by intellectual means.

himself from his French surroundings and imagining England; the more impetuous Peter's false starts to Bermuda, Europe, and other beckoning lands melt in the conclusion that "I am not compelled to go anywhere; I can stay on right here." The accounts of mystic, diabolic, horrific rites read by Peter Whiffle out of "Dr. Braitaille's *Le Diable au XIX^e Siecle*" outdo the efforts of Huysmans in imaginative grossness, but in all details Van Vechten maintains the basic humor of their excess--closer to James Branch Cabell in this respect than to Huysmans. When Peter concludes the selection "with an expression of ironic exultation," his biographer is asked what he thinks of it. "Very pretty," he ventures. When each of the drugs which Peter takes for the mystic powers of divination and vision has a violently unhealthy, opposite effect, completely denying the powers of mind in the ensuing physical illness, he is bewildered and humanly discouraged; disease is foreign to him. *Des Esseintes* seems most in character when prostrated by exhaustion and self-inflicted physical debility. Most indicative of all is the climax of Peter's esoteric experiments--the near farce of a very real explosion which lands both experimenter and observer in a very real hospital. *Des Esseintes*, troubled by the religious doubts of the Old World grown too civilized, too refined, stalks Death;

himself from his French surroundings and his
land; the more important Peter's later years to himself
Europe, and other countries. Peter's life in the continent
that "I am not compelled to go anywhere; I can stay as
right here." The accounts of his life, his life, his life
rites read by Peter while out of his French life.
Le Diable au XIX^e siècle, and the life of Peter
in imaginative surroundings, and in his life, his life
maintains the basic nature of his life, his life, his life
James French Cabell in his life, his life, his life
Then Peter concluded the article with an expression
of ironic exultation, "this is the life, this is the life
think of it. "Very quiet," he said, "the world is
the things which Peter knew for his life, his life, his life
divination and vision has a violently unstable, unstable
effect, completely denying the power of mind in the
ensuing physical illness. He is bewildered and humiliated
discouraged; disease is forced upon him. His resistance
seems most in character when presented by exultation
and self-inflicted physical debility. The life, his life, his life
of all is the climax of Peter's artistic experience--
the near force of a very real explosion which leads to
experiment and observer in a very real, real, real, real
Essential, provided by the artist's sense of the life
World grown too civilized, too refined, too refined.

Peter Whiffle, troubled only with youthful confusion, indecision, and doubts of his own capability, seeks--and finds--his answers in Life. Each, in a dream brought on by physical proximity to death, encounters the personification of that inevitability. Des Esseintes' is a horrific nightmare describing in pulse-raising prose his maddening pursuit by the image of the Pox: "The ambiguous, sexless creature was green, and from under purple lids shone a pair of pale blue eyes, cold and terrible; two arms of an inordinate leanness, like a skeleton's bare to the elbows, shaking with fever, projected from ragged sleeves, and the fleshless thighs shuddered in churn-boots, a world too wide."¹ To Peter Whiffle, Death--"A woman in a rusty black robe" which "confused itself in my mind with Kathleen-ni-Houlihan and (will you believe it?) Sara Allgood!"--waits impatiently while an Angel and the Devil plead, like California and Florida real estate agents, the advantages of their respective realms. Peter dispels all three with the realization of the laissez-faire personal philosophy which punctuates the novel like a refrain, "I was not compelled to go anywhere."

Peter Whiffle is able to lift himself from the oppression of his obsessions. Hope for Des Esseintes is

¹J. K. Huysmans, Against the Grain, p. 188.

Peter Whittle, troubled only with a sense of
 indecision, and doubt of his own capability, and
 this--his answer to the question of the
 of physical proximity to death, and the
 location of that inevitability. But the
 horrific nightmare described in the
 maddening pursuit by the police of the
 sexual creature was not, and from the
 shown a pair of pale blue eyes, cold and
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 it? Sara Alford?--wasn't it
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 novel like a petal, "I was not
 Peter Whittle is able to find the
 oppression of his conscience. Hope for the

a mocking ghost, although his creator found it again in Roman Catholicism. Part of Peter's last discussion with Carl deserves quotation for the light it throws on both Peter Whiffle and his creator:

I am not complaining or asking for sympathy. I am explaining how I felt, not how I feel. I never spoke of it, of course, while I felt that way. I am only talking about it now because I have gone beyond, because, in a sense, at least, I understand. I am happier now, happier, perhaps, than I have ever been before, for in the past four years I have left behind my restlessness and achieved something like peace. I no longer feel that I have failed. Of course, I have failed, but that was because I was attempting to do something that I had no right to attempt. . . . It is necessary to do only what one must, what one is forced by nature to do.¹

This much of Peter Whiffle is timeless, and qualifies among the most lasting aspects of Van Vechten's work. But the novel had more to offer its reader in 1922--and subsequent readers interested in that time. It presented Paris through the enchanted eyes of one of the Americans who knew it best. It guided the reader on a sophisticate's tour of the city which had grown fabulous with the tales of returning doughboys. It catalogued the dream so much of America cherished of being dropped in the midst of that uninhibited, cosmopolitan

¹Peter Whiffle, p. 243. An amusing letter from Thomas Beer to Van Vechten (May 25, 1922) commented succinctly: "Dear Van Vechten--My aunt has read Peter Whiffle and says that it contains a good moral lesson. Yours, Thomas Beer."

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This much of Peter Whillie is Whillie, and
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 on a sophisticated's look of the city which had grown
 fabulous with the tales of returning foreigners. It
 catalogued the dream so much of America's imagination of
 being dropped in the midst of that and without compensation.

¹Peter Whillie, p. 245. An edition of Peter Whillie
 Thomas Beer to Van Vechten (May 22, 1923) contained and
 closely: "Dear Van Vechten--my last letter to you
 Whillie and says that it contains a good novel lesson.
 Yours, Thomas Beer."

scene. "An American youth's first view of Paris, " Robert Morss Lovett has written, "is an unforgettable experience, a favorite theme of Henry James, but nowhere touched on so happily as by Carl Van Vechten in Peter Whiffle."¹

The novel also offered ringside seats at the continuous show, part comic, part serious, put on by the intellectuals who populated the revolving scenes of New York and the Continent. The salon gatherings of Mabel Dodge (Edith Dale in the novels) were reported, while discussions of art, politics, social problems, life, death, and matters in between, provided entertaining, thoughtful respite neatly tied to the narrative of Peter's "life and work." A serious appraisal of the mystic novels written by the little known Arthur Machen stirred up a recognition of that strange stylist that has been renewed by periodic revivals ever since. "The most wonderful man writing English today and nobody knows him!" exclaimed Peter, and Carl gave five pages to his further remarks on the peculiar art of Machen.²

It offered all this in an easy, comfortable prose that, with all its mania for cataloguing remote nomen-

¹Robert Morss Lovett, All Our Years (New York: The Viking Press, 1948), p. 44.

²Peter Whiffle, pp. 196-201.

scene. "An American version of the first scene of the play," Robert Morris Lovett has written, "is an unmistakable experience, a favorite theme of Henry James, and nowhere rendered so happily as by Carl Van Dine in *After the War*."

The novel also offered a picture of the continuous snow, part domestic, part foreign, and of the intellectuals who populated the revolving scenes of New York and the Continent. The novel's characters, while Dodge (Edith Cole in the novel) were reported, while discussions of art, politics, social problems, religion, death, and matters in history, provided entertainment, thoughtful response nearly also to the narrative of "life and work." A serious appraisal of the social scene written by the little known Arthur Anderson, written in recognition of that strange and ill-fated and even named by periodic revivals ever since. "The novel was written by a man writing English today and nobody knows him," said Peter, and Carl gave five pages to his father's review on the peculiar art of manner.

It offered all this in an easy, comfortable prose that, with all its mantle for entertaining, never loses

¹Robert Morris Lovett, *All Our Years* (New York: The Viking Press, 1943), p. 14.

²Peter Whiffle, pp. 196-201.

clatures and dredging various seas of pseudo-scientific terminology, read with the lightness and grace of a comic ballet. Quotation marks and interrupting punctuation were dispensed with, as if the author had carried over into his prose the effects of Erik Satie's lack of bar lines in the music Van Vechten prized so much, those effects being that, as the author himself wrote of Satie's style: "There are no separations. Nothing is dichotomized. . . . The music runs along."¹

Peter Whiffle was a remarkable first novel, even considering the apprenticeship its author served in his essays. It is Van Vechten's signal, but by no means his single, achievement in fiction.

The Blind Bow-Boy

With the success of Peter Whiffle, Van Vechten was acclaimed a novelist and "sat down to write, with the greatest of ease, The Blind Bow-Boy."² During its preparation, the author kept Emily Clark informed of its progress. In July, 1922, he told her that he was "writing a new novel which is amusing me so much that I absolve it from the need of amusing future readers." Again: "My

¹Interpreters and Interpretations, pp. 260-261.

²Sacred and Profane Memories, p. 230.

classics and dredging various sorts of pseudo-scientific terminology, read with the ill-humored and grace of a school belief. Quotation marks and italics are used to carry over into his prose the effects of Latin syntax. The lack of any lines in the music has been pointed out as much, these effects being that, as the author himself writes in Sallia's reply: "There are no quotations, no italics, no disquisitions. . . . The music flows along."

Peter Whittle was a remarkable first novel, even considering the abnormalities of its author's career in the essays. It is Van Vechten's attempt, by no means his single, achievement in fiction.

The Blind Novelist

With the success of Peter Whittle, Van Vechten was acclaimed a novelist and had done so well, with the greatest of ease, the Blind Novelist. During the production, the author kept fairly busy in regard to his progress. In July, 1922, he told me that he was writing a new novel which is entitled no more than a novel from the need of making future readers.

¹Interpreters and Interpretations, p. 450-51.

²Sacted and Profane, p. 150.

formula at present consists in treating extremely serious themes as frivolously as possible. Doubtless when I am eighty I shall be able to write like Sherwood Anderson, if you want me to." Later: ". . .it is a strange opus, wreathed in masks and smiles and false cues and bandages and yet open-faced as an Ingersoll." Finally, in 1923: "It is a nice book. If Ben Hecht had written it, it could be called devastating, but I shall make it charming."¹

Such a book had the seeds of controversy. The reviews brought them to flower. Some placed Van Vechten ceremoniously in company with the sophisticated progeny of Thomas Love Peacock, and wielded names noticeably foreign to American literature to make their point. "Beside Floyd Dell and Willa Cather," wrote Edmund Wilson, "he is Ariel, Till Eulenspiegel."² Ernest Boyd applauded its civilized humor and detachment: "After so many volumes of morbid introspection or of adolescent revolt, it is a relief to be assured that there are people in this country so happily unaware of the alleged disadvantages of being an American, who are not overpowered by a sense of their own identity."³

¹Emily Clark, Innocence Abroad, p. 134.

²Edmund Wilson, "Late Violets from the Nineties," The Dial, LXXV (Oct., 1923), 387.

³Ernest Boyd, "Van Vechten's New York," The Nation, CXVII (Sept. 5, 1923), 245.

formula at present consists in spreading existing conditions
 themes as previously as possible. The idea was to
 elicit I shall be able to write the "new" and
 if you want me to, I shall be able to write the "new"
 wretched in masks and voices and false ones and in ways
 and yet open-faced as an impostor. (p. 117)
 "It is a nice book. It is a nice book. It is a nice book."
 could be called Evangelical, but I shall be able to write the "new"
 Such a book has the words of Evangelical.
 reviews brought them to light. Some placed Evangelical
 ceremoniously in company with the Evangelical program
 of Thomas Love Peacock, and wished to make Evangelical
 foreign to American literature to make Evangelical
 "Beside Frank Hoff and Willie Jackson," wrote Evangelical
 son, "he is Evangelical, till Evangelical."
 applied the civilized human and Evangelical Evangelical
 so many volumes of moral Evangelical and Evangelical
 revolt, it is a relief to be assured that there are
 people in this country so happily ignorant of the Evangelical
 disadvantages of being an Evangelical, who are not Evangelical
 powered by a sense of their own Evangelical."

- ¹ Emily Clark, Impotence Abroad, p. 131.
- ² Edmund Wilson, Letters to John G. Saxe, p. 117.
- ³ Ernest Boyd, Van Vechten's New York, p. 117.
- ⁴ Nation, CLVII (Sept. 5, 1923), 215.

Others lamented the new perversity and nastiness, however light and readable, in the author of the brilliant Peter Whiffle. An amusing and enlightening squabble took place in the pages of the Bookman. A review of the disappointed variety, signed "J. F." (John Farrar), concluded: "It is neither very good as a shocker nor very penetrating as a satire. . .and if you are a really nice person, you will not understand a great deal of it, thank heaven! What a pity for a man who can write so well to write such a sublimated edition of a Broadway scandal sheet."¹ In a subsequent issue, a "Miss E. D." took him to task in a letter which asserted, "The difference [between Van Vechten, D. H. Lawrence, Sherwood Anderson, and the other 'nasties'] is that the 'Bow-Boy' is not pretending to be serious, and the others are. Van Vechten is at his best in a light, satirical vein and being a modern young man he cannot possibly write a novel that does not deal largely with sex." Farrar generously overlooked the non-sequitur and forgot Peter Whiffle, replying that she "couldn't possibly have understood Mr. Van Vechten's book," and recommending "that she have it carefully interpreted to her by, say, an eminent psychologist."²

¹Bookman, LVIII (Oct., 1923), 202.

²Bookman, LVIII (Dec., 1923), 508-509.

Others lamented the new personality of the book, now in light and readable, in the manner of the brilliant Whiffle. An amusing and entertaining episode, however, in the pages of the bookman. A review of the bookman, variety, signed "A. P." (John P. ...), concluded, "It is neither very good as a shocker nor very interesting as a satire. . . and if you are a really wise person, you will not understand a great deal of it. . . . However, pity for a man who can write so well as this and a sublimated edition of a Broadway bookman. . . . The subsequent issue, a "Miss E. P." book, is a book in a letter which asserted, "The difference between the two books, D. H. Lawrence, Sherwood Anderson, and the other 'master' is that the 'Boy-Boy' is not pretentious, is serious, and the other is not. . . . The 'Boy-Boy' is best in a light, satirical vein and being a modern young man he cannot possibly write a novel that does not deal largely with sex." Farther generously overlooked the non-serious and forgot Peter Whiffle, copying that the "couldn't possibly have understood it, Van Vechten's book," and recommending "that she have it carefully interpreted to her by, say, an eminent psychologist."

¹Bookman, LVIII (Oct., 1923), 208.

²Bookman, LVIII (Dec., 1923), 208-209.

The story itself is a revised version of *The Rake's Progress*. Harold Prewett, a youth fresh from college, unassailed in his innocence by worldly experience or knowledge, is deposited by his father in the midst of New York's most sophisticated, uninhibited society, revolving around its curiously detached queen, Campaspe Lorillard, ostensibly to replace with more serviceable experience in the ways of life the cloistered education ordered by his mother. When it is revealed to Harold that the experiment was meant to turn him forever against the temptations of such high-life, he resents his father's duplicity, embraces the experiences which had formerly been so repulsive to him, and announces his preference for the company of the uninhibited sect which had accepted him honestly. The worldly education of the innocent is completed in the last line of the novel when Campaspe, bound for Europe, discovers on her ship the erstwhile lamb, Harold Prewett, outward bound with the infamous Duke of Middlebottom, the most perverse member of her realm, as his traveling companion.

Readers beguiled by the book's title, by the name of its heroine, and by the presence of her pitiful husband, nicknamed "Cupid," may have recalled that Campaspe was the beautiful concubine of Alexander the Great, given by the king to the artist Apelles, who had fallen

in love with her as he painted her picture. They may have inferred that Van Vechten's Campaspe was given only to her creator since she will have none of any of the willing male characters in the book, least of all her adoring husband. If they referred to the airy song that closes the last scene of Act III in John Lyly's Elizabethan dramatization, Alexander and Campaspe, they learned that the surpassing lady completely bested Cupid in a game of chance, divesting him in the final wager of both his eyes, vouchsafing him his legendary blindness and providing an arresting title for Carl Van Vechten.¹ In the novel, the author symbolizes this theme rather too patently through occasional references to the statue of the blindfolded Eros which stands in the center of

¹The song is rendered by Apelles, who has not yet been awarded Campaspe:

Cupid and my Campaspe playd
 At Cardes for kisses, Cupid payd;
 He stakes his Quiuer, Bow & Arrows,
 His Mothers doues, & teeme of sparows;
 Looses them too; then, downe he throwes
 The corral of his lippe, the rose
 Growing on's cheek (but none knows how),
 With these, the cristall of his Brow,
 And then the dimple of his chinne:
 All these did my Campaspe winne.
 At last, hee set her both his eyes;
 Shee won, and Cupid blind did rise.
 O Loue! has shee done this to Thee?
 What shall (Alas!) become of mee?

Van Vechten also wrote music for "Cupid and Campaspe," included in his collection of songs: Five Old English Ditties, Chicago, 1904.

in love with her as he painted her picture. The
 have inferred that Van Veen's *Gammas* was given only
 to her creator since she will have none of any of the
 willing male characters in the book, least of all her
 adoring husband. If they referred to the story song that
 closes the last scene of act III in John Veen's *Ellen*—
beten dramatization, Alexander and Gammas, they
 learned that the surprising lady completely passed up
 in a game of chance, divesting him in the final wager
 of both his eyes, vociferously and his legendary blindness
 and providing an arresting title for Paul van Veen's
 In the novel, the author symbolizes the theme of
 too patently through occasional references to the status
 of the blindfolded dice which stands in the center of

The song is rendered by Agatha, who has
 got been awarded Gammas:

Could and my Gammas play
 At cards for kisses, Cupid paid;
 He strikes his quiver, now a arrow,
 His Mother's bones, & some of arrows;
 Looses them too; then, now he throws
 The corner of his lip, the nose
 Growing on a cheek (but none know how)
 With these, the artist of his brow,
 And then the tip of his finger
 All these did my Gammas win.
 At last, he set her both his eyes;
 She won, and Cupid blind did rise.
 O Love! has understood this too
 What shall (Alas!) become of me?

Van Veen also wrote music for *Gammas* and *Ellen*,
 included in his collection of songs, *Two Old Songs*,
 Pitts, Chicago, 1901.

Campaspe's patio. In the narrative, if the term can be used for such a whirling merry-go-round of action, the capricious bow-boy is truly blind. Harold Prewett shifts from the proper Alice Blake to the improper Zimbule O'Grady in a week, with a respectful pass at the incomparable Campaspe sandwiched in between. Cupid Lorillard, frustrated by his wife's constant disdain and rejection, purchases a season ticket to Zimbule's bedroom, and the others in Campaspe's society exhibit no consistency--do not want any--in their amours.

The shocking aspects of The Blind Bow-Boy are not especially tasteful. They are delivered, however, with humor and ironic purpose, and to the extent that these elements are paramount (they are not as consistently as one might wish) their excess is acceptable. Campaspe does not know the vices, one of her friends remarks, she invents them. In a similar fashion, Van Vechten grants his own license in the manner he assumes: "A book, Campaspe considered, should have the swiftness of melodrama, the lightness of farce, to be a real contribution to thought. . . . How could anything serious be hidden more successfully than in a book which pretended to be light and gay?"¹ At times, the gayety of

¹The Blind Bow-Boy, p. 163.

the proceedings does not appear functionally perverse, even though part of the guiding philosophy in the book is the cathartic amusement offered by the observation of perversity in others.

The underlying purpose of the book is reflected in its society of sophisticates who covet the outlandish in the knowledge that life and truth themselves are outlandish. They prefer to meet absurdity head on rather than have it eat away their lives by slow corrosion. The release implicit in such a creed is, to a certain extent, the explanation of the gaps between Van Vechten's first and second novels. Peter Whiffle's "Do what you have to do" had the ring of inevitability, but The Blind Bow-Boy altered it subtly to "Do what you will."

The Tattooed Countess

The subtitle for The Blind Bow-Boy was a phrase cleverly calculated to announce the serio-comic nature of the novel. Van Vechten called it "A Cartoon for a Stained-Glass Window." The phrase which accompanied his next novel, The Tattooed Countess (1924), was "A Romantic Novel with a Happy Ending." This subtitle, like everything else about its book, carried a broad irony which would have become gross in the hands of a writer less accomplished in the light touch.

the proceedings does not appear functionally, however, even though part of the guiding philosophy in the book is the cathartic movement offered by the observation of perversity in others.

The underlying purpose of the book is reflected in its society of sophisticated and cleverly calculated in the knowledge that life and death themselves are not random. They prefer to meet absurdly dead on rather than have it eat away their lives by slow erosion. The release implicit in such a trend is, to a certain extent, the explanation of the gap between Van Wyck's first and second novels. "East of Hallelujah" is a book you have to do" had the ring of inevitability, and the Bow-Boy altered its subtitle to "no what you will."

The Tattered Countess

The subtitle for the Blind Bow-Boy was a pun on cleverly calculated to make the reader's mind wander of the novel. Van Wyck's subtitle for the Countess is "Stained-Glass Window," the phrase which is repeated in next novel. The Tattered Countess is a novel with a happy ending. This subtitle, like everything else about the book, carried a good iron which would have become press in the hands of a writer less accomplished in the light touch.

The book joined many others of the Twenties in its portraiture of small-town America, but its approach was unique.¹ Sinclair Lewis used a kind of satirical redundancy, cataloguing so many examples of unwitting buffoonery and shallowness in the small-town mind that it barely fell short of affectionate caricature. Floyd Dell chronicled, with a depressing atmosphere of vague frustration, the struggle of a sensitive young soul in the crass environment of village provincialism. Sherwood Anderson moved inside the people themselves to reveal the tragedy, the intensity, and the emotional animation of the town. Van Vechten's novel combines all three of these methods and adds to the mixture the catalyst of pervading irony.

The tattooed countess is Ella Nattatorrini, widow of an Italian count, intimate of cosmopolitan scenes and societies, irrepressible lover of beautiful young men and of love itself. The novel opens on June 17, 1897 (the day on which the author was 17), with the return of this sophisticated but entirely human lady to the town of Maple Valley, Iowa, where, fifty years before, she had

¹Arthur Davidson Ficke, expressing his pleasure with *The Tattooed Countess* in a letter to its author (Aug. 14, 1924), wrote: ". . . it is delightful to see Main Street described in terms of amusement instead of the usual terms of fury."

The book joined many others of the twenties in its portrayal of small-town America, and its approach was unique.¹ Sinclair Lewis used a kind of satirical redundancy, cataloguing so many examples of unthinking conformity and shallowness in the small-town life that it barely left room for affectionate criticism. It is well chronicled, with a depressing atmosphere of stagnation, the struggle of a sensitive young soul in the crass environment of village provincialism. Theodore Anderson moved inside the provincial himself to reveal the tragedy, the intensity, and the emotional situation of the town. Van Vechten's novel combines all these of these methods and adds to the picture the element of pervading irony.

The last novel concerns its little town, which is of an Italian count, instance of cosmopolitanism and social, irrepressible fever of beautiful youth, and of love itself. The novel opens on June 14, 1917 (the day on which the major world war began) and this sophisticated but entirely unworldly town of Maple Valley, Iowa, where fifty years before the war

¹Arthur Davidson Stone, *Exploring the Past*, with The Pastored Countess in a letter to the author (Aug. 14, 1921), wrote: "It is difficult to see Main Street described in terms of unshaken realism of the usual terms of irony."

been born Ella Poore. It is her hope that her childhood scene will help dispel the monumental grief resulting from her dismissal by the last of a series of Continental young men to whom she had devoted herself and her late husband's fortune.

The irony implicit in this situation is borne through the novel with a skillful use of modulation and an artistic sense of form. Having given his reader the Countess in the opening scene, Van Vechten presents the town in the second chapter by recording the regular morning activity and conversation of two insignificant housewives, Mrs. Bierbauer and Mrs. Fox, whose barren lives, like their front porches, are separated only by a wooden fence. Introduced as local members of the Parcae who "preside over human destinies in every town in the middle west," they reveal themselves much more adequately through their perfect dialogue and the hilarious fact that Mrs. Bierbauer's somnolent tomcat is named Trilby. The natural limits of the narrative having been reached with the climactic departure of the Countess, an epilogue returns the reader to the Parcae and their perpetual rocking chair pronouncements on their limited scene.

The hasty exit of the Countess involves a figure who remained a peripheral character through the rest of Van Vechten's novels. Gareth Johns, who was to be an

been born Elie Poore. It is not until the end of the book
 scene will help to help the reader to understand the
 from her dismissal by the last of a series of incidents
 young men to whom she had devoted herself, and her last
 husband's fortune.

The irony implicit in this situation is more
 through the novel with a skillful use of symbolism and
 an artistic sense of form. Having finished the first
 Countess in the opening scene, Van Vechten presents the
 town in the second chapter by recording the regular
 morning activity and conversation of the last of the
 housewives, Mrs. Harbison and Mrs. Poore, and their
 lives, like their first husbands, are separated only by
 wooden fence. Introduced as local characters of the town
 who "preside over human destinies in every town in the
 middle west," they reveal themselves as more responsible
 through their perfect dialogue in the third chapter
 that Mrs. Harbison's position toward her husband is
 The natural limits of the narrative are reached
 with the climactic departure of the Countess, and
 returns the reader to the scene and their personal
 looking chair pronouncements on their limited scene.
 The hasty exit of the Countess involves a figure
 who remained a peripheral character through the rest of
 Van Vechten's novels. The Countess, who was to be an

eminent novelist to the characters of later books, is the sensitive youth bound in by the provincialism and hypocrisy of the town. He is the only resident who prefers to conform to the Countess Nattatorrini rather than the other way around, and she is the only person in his life who can lead him, both figuratively and literally, beyond Maple Valley. This, plus his youth and gender, are sufficient to fulfill the purpose of the Countess in coming back to Maple Valley, but, ironically, it is eventually to be accomplished only by leaving.

There is more than a little in Gareth Johns to suggest the young Van Vechten in Cedar Rapids. Gareth is, "paradoxically, of both a sentimental and cynical turn of mind." His activities and interests are consistently those that Van Vechten has recorded of himself elsewhere. He collects, for instance, mementoes of theatrical celebrities and reads omnivorously in the same books that are recorded as Van Vechten's early literary fare. When he takes Lennie Colman, his aging high school teacher (whose painful infatuation for Gareth is the novel's moving personal tragedy) on a hunt for birds' eggs, she doesn't think he should take all the eggs (a "clutch") from any one nest; an autobiographical essay of 1921 recalls, "When I sought birds' eggs, my

eminent novelist to the character of these books, is the sensitive youth found in the provincialism and hypocrisy of the town. He is the only person who is not to conform to the conventional standards of the other way around, and he is the only person in the town who can lead him, both physically and mentally, to Maple Valley. This, plus the youth and gentleness, is sufficient to fulfill the purpose of the journey in coming back to Maple Valley, but, ironically, it is eventually to be accomplished only by leaving.

There is more than a little in the story to suggest the young man's reaction to the world. It is, paradoxically, a both a spiritual and physical turn of mind. His activities and interests are constantly those that Van Veen has not experienced himself elsewhere. He collects, for instance, specimens of theatrical celebrities and reads extensively in the books that are reported as Van Veen's early library fare. When he takes leave of the town, he is a school teacher (whose primary instruction for Van Veen is the novel's moving personal tragedy) on a hunt for birds' eggs, and doesn't realize he should take all the eggs (a "clutch") from any one nest; an anthropological essay of 1921 recalls, "When I sought for eggs, my

mother, picturing the despair of the mother bird, begged me to leave at least one egg in each nest I despoiled."¹ The setting of time and place add weight to such evidence; but there is invention enough in the story to make autobiographical matter a valuable means of achieving verisimilitude and total effect.² Gareth Johns does escape into the world he seeks, as did Van Vechten, but the story of his escape is the work of art as well as of memory. The tragedy of Lennie Colman's life is a memorable instance of this invention. She is the sensitive soul who does not escape, the person qualified for life who lacks the strength and independence to do what she wishes to make of herself what she is.

The mixture of sentiment and cynicism in Gareth Johns is present in equal parts in the book. Like Sinclair Lewis, Van Vechten reveals an affection for the very scenes and people he satirizes. In 1918, he had written, "The Iowa scene has been infrequently described

¹"The Tin Trunk," Sacred and Profane Memories, p. 8.

²Significantly, the relation is in the third person. First person point of view (something Van Vechten never attempted after its successful use in Peter Whiffle) would have made the exceptional form of The Tattooed Countess impossible. Omniscience was necessary, for example, to bring the Countess and the Parcae before the reader with the special impact and balance of the two opening chapters.

mother, picturing the despair of the mother who, begged
me to leave at least one day in each week. I was obliged.
The setting of time and place and what to expect, and so on.
but there is invention enough in the story to make it into
biographical matter a valuable means of biography. I was
simultaneous and total effect. I was in the world, and the
into the world he seeks, as the world is the world, and the
story of his escape is the story of his escape. I was in the
memory. The tragedy of his life is a tragedy. I was in the
instance of this invention. I was in the world, and the
who does not escape, the person who is in the world, and the
I was the strength and the person who is in the world, and the
to make of herself what she is. I was in the world, and the
The mixture of sentiment and intellect in her story.
I was in the world, and the person who is in the world, and the
of her life, Van Veen's escape is an escape. I was in the
very scenes and people as well as the story. I was in the
written, "The low scene has been infamously described."

1 "The Tin Truck," "The Tin Truck," "The Tin Truck,"

2 Significant, the relation is in the story.
person. First person point of view (something like the
never attempted after his successful escape in the story.
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Countess impossible. I was in the world, and the
example, to bring the Countess and the person who is in the
reader with the special interest in the story.
opening chapters.

in literature and no writer, I think, has yet done justice to it."¹ By 1924, writers were discovering that scene. A year earlier, Roger L. Sergel set his study in psychological realism, Arlie Gelston, in an Iowa country town, utilizing the Iowa landscape and the village of Coon Falls. Ruth Suckow, whose work permanently abrogated Van Vechten's statement, had begun her stories of Iowa life as early as 1921, contributing to The Midland and The Smart Set. Van Vechten's contribution in 1924 gave his native state full status on the literary map of America.

This element of sentimental affection for the locale is, however, more than offset by the indictment of its society. The title of the book itself symbolizes the ironic contrasts which bare the soggy soul of the town. The Countess, who invariably wears her heart on her sleeve, is appropriately tattooed on her arm, a token of her dedication to her last young man. Her open honesty is matched by the secrecy and duplicity of the town. Comparing herself with the Maple Valley hypocrites, she observes that "I am tattooed on my arm while they are tattooed on their hearts." Van Vechten speaks of Maple

¹In the Garret, p. 79.

in literature and no writer, I think, has yet done justice to it.¹ By 1924, writers were discovering its value. A year earlier, Roger C. Brown had said in his preface to *Logical Realism*, "This is a book about the town, realizing the town landscape and the village of town." Felix, Ruth Schickel, whose work was particularly concerned with Van Vechten's statement, had been in the service of town life as early as 1921, contributing to the *Atlantic* and *The Smart Set*. Van Vechten's contribution in 1921 gave his native state full status on the literary map of America.

This element of sentimental reflection for the locale is, however, more than offset by the realization of its society. The title of the book itself, *Realism*, the ironic comments which were the very soul of the town. The Courtess, who inevitably wears her heart on her sleeve, is appropriately tattooed on her arm. A token of her dedication to her last young man, an open honesty is matched by the actress and quality of the town. Comparing herself with the *Maple Valley* hypocrites, she observes that "I am tattooed on my arm while they are tattooed on their hearts." Van Vechten speaks of *Realism*.

¹In the *Atlantic*, p. 12.

Valley as a "provincial community where so many people were old because the young went away as soon as possible to carry out their lives elsewhere"; and he has the Countess exclaim prophetically (in 1897): "The narrow prejudices of this town, based on a complete ignorance of life, are stifling. . .I wonder. . .if all America is like this? [sic] You'd better look out! You don't know what you're doing to the next generation. They won't stand it, no one with any brains would stand it! They'll revolt! They'll break loose!"¹ This was the generation the local future of which had been gloriously envisioned earlier by Judge Porter, who turned the occasion for a welcome address to the Countess into a splendidly ridiculous eulogy of the Maple City High School.

The ingredients of this novel are mixed with such proportion and taste that it nearly belies itself. Irony and humor are so nicely matched to a style of simplicity and wit that the story is never offered the burden of its own weight.² In a letter to a Boston

¹Carl Van Vechten, The Tattooed Countess (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1924), p. 130.

²Joseph Warren Beach in The Outlook for American Prose (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1927), pp. 139-161, prints isolated excerpts from The Tattooed Countess, discredits the sophisticated style and censures

Valley as a "privileged community where no party politics
were old because the young were away as soon as possible
to carry out their lives elsewhere; and no party
countess existed, especially in 1911. The narrow
prejudices of this town, based on a complete ignorance
of life, are stilling. . . . It is like this, I think, that
is like this. You'd better look at it. You'd better
know what you're doing to the next generation. That
won't stand it. No one who has been with it.
They'll revolt. They'll break loose. This was the
generation the local future of which had been
envisioned earlier by Judge Foster, who turned the
occasion for a welcome address to the town. Into a
splendidly ridiculous entry of the town. It was
School.

The ingredients of this novel are first of all
such proportion and exactness. It is nearly perfect itself.
Irony and humor are so nicely mixed as to be of
simplicity and wit that the story is never lost and
burden of its own weight. In a letter to a Boston

¹Carl Van Vechten, *The Ragged Dicks*, New York: A. A. Knopf, 1924, p. 130.
²Joseph Warren Beach in *The American Novel*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1927, pp. 159-161, points out that the novel is a masterpiece of the art of the novel.

lady who wished advice for her son who desired to become a writer, W. Somerset Maugham wrote, on October 10, 1924:

A novel should have an inner harmony and there is no reason why the reader should be deprived of the delight which he may obtain from a beautiful proportion. In this connection I strongly recommend your son to read Carl Van Vechten's "The Tattooed Countess." He will find in it a model of form which alone makes the book a pleasure to read; and he will find also ingenious characterization and an enchanting humor. He cannot read it attentively without obtaining from it valuable instruction, profit and edification. It is a perfect example of perhaps the most difficult book to write: the light novel.¹

With The Tattooed Countess, Van Vechten fashioned the links which were to connect all seven of his novels through the appearance in each book of one or more characters familiar in the plots of the others. The device was not new. Balzac and Edgar Saltus both had characters appearing in a number of novels. James Branch Cabell also presented a series, jumping generations and characters to round out a full picture. The interlocking nature of

the use of individual words. Stanley Edgar Hyman in The Armed Vision (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1948, p. 301), while discussing the "teacher's close reading," cites "Joseph Warren Beach, in The Outlook for American Prose particularly, reading contemporary literature with the grammarian's little eye, and rewriting, in a 'corrected' form, passages from authors. . . as though they were freshman themes."

¹ Charles Hanson Towne, Carl Van Doren, and others, W. Somerset Maugham, Novelist, Essayist, Dramatist, with a Note on Novel Writing by Mr. Maugham (New York: George H. Doran, n. d.), p. 52.

lady who wished advice for her son who desired to become a writer. W. Somerset Maugham wrote, "The Lady of the Lake," 1924.

A novel should have an inner pattern and there is no reason why the reader should be denied of the delight which he may obtain from a beautiful proportion. In this connection I strongly recommend your son to read Carl Van Vechten's "The Fatted Lamb." He will find in it a model of a novel which alone makes the book a pleasure to read; and he will find also ingenious characterization and an excellent humor. He cannot read it attentively without obtaining from it valuable instruction, poetic and edification. It is a perfect example of a novel. The most difficult book to write is the novel.

With The Fatted Lamb, Van Vechten has done

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presented a series, jumping generations and characters.

to round out a full picture. The interlocking characters of

the use of individual words. Stanley Edgar Hyman in "The Armed Vision" (New York: New York, 1934, pp. 207) while discussing the "season's close reading," cites "Joseph Warren's death" in the "The Fatted Lamb" as particularly, reading contemporary literature with the grammarian's little eye, and revealing the "connected form, passages from authors. As though they were 'freshman themes'."

[Charles Hannon Lowe, "The Fatted Lamb," in "The Fatted Lamb," W. Somerset Maugham, "Novels," "The Fatted Lamb," "The Fatted Lamb," a note on novel writing by W. Somerset Maugham, New York: H. Bonaparte, n. d., p. 52.]

Van Vechten's series, however, seems to have no heavy pattern, no conscious overall scheme. As a result, the reader of all seven novels gains the effect of a camera revolving over a panorama, but stopping here and there for a long, detailed closeup of a scene which appears highlighted. As in the fluid comedy of television, the performers can wander blithely from one scene to its adjoining set; but unlike performers in that self-conscious medium, Van Vechten's characters appear at random, unannounced, at ease, and unaware of their own ubiquity. They are as content with a walk-on as they are with a leading role.

The first four novels comprise a set in confused order, with connections made both backwards and forwards. Working in both directions from The Tattooed Countess (written third, but first in point of narrative chronology), Van Vechten reached Peter Whiffle through the presence of the young Clara Barnes, adolescent diva of Maple Valley, who was to continue her pursuit of the singer's art and fame in the cosmopolitan society of Carl and Peter, and through the Parisian life anticipated by Gareth Johns in his escape with the Countess. Firecrackers, the fourth novel, returned to the society of The Blind Bow-Boy, tracing further the careers of Campaspe, Paul Moody, and others of their sophisticated set. It reached back to

Van Veen's series, however, seems to have no heavy pattern, no conscious overall scheme, as a result, the reader of all seven novels finds the effect of a constant revolving over a panorama, the stopping here and there for a long, detailed close-up of a scene which is highlighted. As in the first novel of the series, the performers can wander happily from one scene to the next adjoining act; but unlike the first novel, the characters are not named, at ease, and unaware of their own situation. They are as content with a walk-on as they are with a leading role.

The first four novels comprise a set in continuous order, with connections made both backward and forward. Working in both directions from the first novel, *Van Veen* (written third, but first in point of narrative chronology), Van Veen reached Peter White, the second novel, of the young Clara Barnes, adolescent girl of the village who was to continue her pursuit of the singer's art and fame in the cosmopolitan society of Paris and London, and through the Parisian life and the Parisian life in his escape with the Countess, *Van Veen*, the fourth novel, returned to the society of the village, tracing further the career of Clara Barnes, and others of their sophisticated set. It seemed back to

The Tattooed Countess through the entrances of Gareth Johns (now a successful author of international notoriety and acclaim) and the final exit of the Countess Nattator-rini, whose extraordinary death scene is witnessed by her friend, Campaspe Lorillard. Edith Dale, patroness of personalities and ideas in Peter Whiffle, is re-introduced in correspondence as Campaspe reads through her morning mail, and takes her curtain call offstage in the New Mexican scenes of the 1928 opus, Spider Boy. Mahalah Wiggins, whom Peter Whiffle almost married, is another character from that novel who is revived briefly when she turns up at a party in Firecrackers.¹ Campaspe and Gareth Johns both enter the sepia settings of Nigger Heaven as sympathetic whites briefly seen at Harlem occasions, and Johns carries the association of former books and characters into the final novel, Parties, wherein he associates with Hamish Wilding at one of the interminable cocktail parties, and accompanies that young man to a Harlem apartment.

Firecrackers

In her enthusiasm for Van Vechten's third novel, Gertrude Atherton "swore a solemn oath that the author of

¹Mahalah is identified as an actress. Campaspe asks, "Where does she act?" "In an old-fashioned piece of furniture with four posts," is the reply. That is all we hear of Miss Wiggins.

The Tattooed Countess through the entrance of Gareth Jones (now a successful author of international notoriety and acclaim) and the final exit of the Countess Mattador- rini, whose extraordinary death scene is witnessed by her friend, Camargo Jordano, Edith Dale, patroness of personalities and ideas in Peter Whiffle, is re-introduced in correspondence as Camargo reads through her morning mail, and takes her curtain call offstage in the New Mexican scenes of the 1928 opera, Spider Boy. Michaela Wiggins, whom Peter Whiffle almost married, is another character from that novel who is revived briefly when she turns up at a party in Firecrackers.¹ Camargo and Gareth Jones both enter the opera settings of Nigger Heaven as sympathetic whites briefly seen at Harlem occasions, and Jones carries the association of former books and characters into the final novel, Parties, wherein he associates with Michaela Wilding at one of the interminable cocktail parties, and accompanies that young man to a Harlem apartment.

Firecrackers

In her enthusiasm for Van Vechten's third novel, Gertrude Atherton "swore a solemn oath that the author of

¹Michaela is identified as an actress. Camargo asks, "Where does she act?" "In an old-fashioned piece of furniture with four posts," is the reply. That is all we hear of Miss Wiggins.

'The Tattooed Countess' would not be long for this world if his next book dealt not with the Parisian activities of that fin de siecle time and couple."¹ In the opening paragraph of Firecrackers, Van Vechten cleverly parried the threat by picturing the impatience of Paul Moody with a novel identifiable to the reader without benefit of titles as a sequel or continuation of The Tattooed Countess (Campaspe later reveals the author: Gareth Johns). It "dealt with a young American boy kept by a rich woman in her middle years" and "was, Paul felt rather than thought, too much like life to be altogether agreeable."² He decided he could not suffer it further perusal. In this fashion, Van Vechten explains his return to the speed, gayety, and fantasy of The Blind Bow-Boy crowd. Further on, he has Gareth Johns defend it in a discussion which has its bearing on all his fiction:

It doesn't seem to occur to the crowd that it is possible for an author to believe that life is largely without excuse, that if there is a God he conducts the show aimlessly, if not, indeed, maliciously, that men and women run around automatically seeking escapes from their troubles and outlets for their lusts. The crowd is still more incensed when an

¹Scott Cunningham, "Yellow-Jackets," Chicago Evening Post (Aug. 14, 1925), p. 1

²Carl Van Vechten, Firecrackers (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1925), p. 1.

'The Tattooed Countess' would not be long for sale world if his next book dealt not with the same old-vices of that fin de siècle time and people. In the opening paragraph of Firestorm, Van Vechten cleverly parried the thrust by picturing the appearance of Paul Moody with a novel identifiable to the reader without benefit of titles as a sequel or continuation of the Tattooed Countess (Campese later reveals the identity of Gareth Johns). It "deals with a young man who meets by a rich woman in her middle years" and "was, Paul told rather than thought, too much like life to be otherwise agreeable."² He decided he could not suffer it further personal. In this fashion, Van Vechten explains his return to the speed, gaiety, and fantasy of The Blind Bow-boy crowd. Further on, he has Gareth Johns defend it in a discussion which has its bearing on all this:

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¹Scott Cunningham, "Yellow-Jackets," Chicago Evening Post (Aug. 14, 1925), p. 1.

²Carl Van Vechten, Firestorm (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1925), p. 1.

author who believes these things refuses to write about them seriously.¹

A few pages later, Johns makes his pronouncement on method:

. . .you must think of a group of people in terms of a packet of firecrackers. You ignite the first cracker and the flash fires the fuse of the second, and so on, until, after a series of crackling detonations, the whole bunch has exploded, and nothing survives but a few torn and scattered bits of paper, blackened with powder.²

The book which announces this technique in its title suggests a curious relation to the musical fantasy "Fireworks," an early composition of Igor Stravinsky, the Russian exponent of exciting rhythms and strange, discordant harmonies, whose new music had struck Van Vechten's ear so forcibly and favorably in his years as a music critic. Regarding its title, Van Vechten had written, "No doubt Stravinsky's Fireworks would make a nice blaze without the name but the title gives us a picture to begin with."³ The statement is equally applicable to the novel. Stravinsky's fantasy begins with a rather fast, rhythmical step, moves into a deeper, more thoughtful sequence, then concludes with two or three

¹Ibid., pp. 164-165.

²Ibid., pp. 167-168.

³Music and Bad Manners, p. 178.

author who believes these things, writes to write about them seriously.

A few pages later, Jones makes his appearance

on method:

... you must think of a group of people in a room, a packet of cigarettes, a cigarette in the hand, a match, and the first line of the poem, and so on, until, after a series of similar scenes, the whole poem has unfolded, and the survivors but a few, and a few lines of text, blackened with powder.

The book which I have just finished in the

title suggests a Russian poet, and the Russian language

"Fireworks," an early composition of the Russian poet,

the Russian expert of English, rhythm and language,

discrepant harmonies, whose new world is a new world

Vecher's ear as for the first time, in his years as

a male critic. Regarding the first, the Russian poet

written, "No doubt Stravinsky's Fireworks would be a

nice place without the name of the title, and as a

picture to begin with. The story is a story of a

card to the novel. Stravinsky's Fireworks begins with a

rather fast, rhythmic story, which is a story, and

thoughtful sequence, then concludes with two or three

¹ Ibid., pp. 16-18.

² Ibid., pp. 107-108.

³ Musik und das Menschliche, p. 178.

crescendos in a series of chromatic arpeggios, advancing and declining octaves. The pattern of the novel is similar.

Into the society of Campaspe Lorillard, Paul Moody, and their coterie of cultivated clowns comes the disrupting riddle of the fabulous Gunnar O'Grady, an attractive youth with a remarkable personal history and philosophical bent. Gracefully, if unwittingly, Gunnar eludes their search through New York for him, appearing only long enough to revive the curiosity of his seekers. That these appearances reveal him as a furnaceman with a book of Persian poetry, a salesman in a flower shop, a pantomimist in the window display of a clothing store, and a professional acrobat, is some indication of the uniqueness of his character.

It is Paul Moody who first discovers and explores the compelling force of the young man, but it is the marvelously detached Campaspe who meets it head-on with her own personal power. This mystic strength of personality endows Gunnar with a disturbing aura of appeal that appears to others, on occasions of emanation, disturbingly suggestive of a halo. Paul, probing at its source through the lad's benevolent double-talk, almost blunders into it at one point: "Do you understand any better?" asks O'Grady. "I'll be damned if I do," answers Paul, "but

transcends in a series of artistic, prophetic, convincing
and declining octaves. The pattern of the novel is
similar.

Into the society of Cambridge, England, 1840,
Moody, and their octave of cultivated consciousness the
disrupting riddle of the famous "Summer of '40," an
attractive youth with a remarkable personal history and
philosophical bent. Gradually, in a series of scenes,
finds their reason for being. The novel is a study in
only long enough to give the context of his career.
That these experiences reveal him as a "free man" with a
book of Persian poetry, a scholar in a library, a
pantomime in the winter night, of a glowing scene,
and a professional success, in some indication of the
uniqueness of his character.
It is Paul Moody who first discovers and explores
the compelling force of the young man, but it is the
marvelously detached Cambridge who needs to be seen also
her own personal power. This is a study in power,
ally endows Gurner with a lightning bolt of intellect and
appears to others, on occasions of emotional disturbance,
suggestive of a halo. Paul, brother of the young man,
the lad's benevolent double-act, which shows him
it at one point: "Do you understand any better?" asks
O'Grady. "I'll be damned if I do," answers Paul.

it doesn't matter. It's interesting enough without understanding." Gunnar hints at its accuracy only by tears glistening in the corners of his eyes.

With Campaspe, however, the acrobat can maintain no such aloof benevolence. There grows between the two a field subject to the stress and pull of two powerful magnets, opposite poles creating a mutual attraction which can cease only when the weaker submits to the pull of the stronger. Campaspe, although her superiority is in jeopardy, wins, the wretched O'Grady yielding himself to her pull, fatal in its effect on his course.¹ Campaspe, composed again, offers herself only with the condescension of the victor who has proved her superiority, and in the process lost her need for the fruits of desire.

The philosophy heard sotto voce in Firecrackers is disturbing and typical. It is selfish by most standards, putting the individual above the group in the quest for personal balance. It is a kind of sophisticated

¹Campaspe's temporary doubts about her otherwise perfect balance are reminiscent of a remark of Van Vechten's recollected in the memoirs of Mabel Dodge Luhan: "'Do you know what love is?' Carl asked of me one day. . . 'It is to feel the way a kitten feels when a man holds it high up in the air in the palm of his hand.'" Mrs. Luhan adds, "I don't know whether he meant the kitten didn't know enough to be scared of falling, or whether it knew with panic the man would let it down." Movers and Shakers, p. 45.

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 "Do you know what love is? Love is a kind of
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Shakespeare, p. 45.

satanism. Campaspe is the proponent who must be on top of everyone and everything encountered in life. Even in love, she must be able to deny herself her natural wishes, she must be superior to her lover, she must reassert her individual self-sufficiency, she must see her lover's subjugating need for her before she can retain that detached balance which is so necessary to her. Then she is free, while Gunnar, unable to cope with his desire in like manner, is damned. It is Thais with the modern dress and trappings of the Anatole France of New York. It is Adam and Eve, the temptation and the fall, with the innovations of arch fantasy. In her exclusive way, Campaspe is the dark angel who triumphs over the angel with the vulnerable halo, and her invincible individuality bests his sort of divinity.

Surrounding this fable is the entertaining scene of Van Vechten's New York, the aspects of which are caught by no other author. Manhattan, he has asserted elsewhere, is too engrossing to leave for even a day.¹ His pictures of the city, which serve every novel save The Tattooed Countess and Spider Boy, display a lively fascination in metropolitan animation. "For him," a friend observed, "Manhattan never loses its Arabian

¹Emily Clark, Innocence Abroad, p. 137.

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 friend observed, "Manhattan never loses for a moment."

Nights glamor, and all the hanging gardens of Babylon are in its sky-line."¹ In his review of the book, Louis Bromfield wrote, ". . . in Carl Van Vechten's 'Fire-crackers' we found such a mirror of New York life, in a few of its many phases, as we have not yet encountered Mr. Van Vechten is not ponderous in his books, but he comes much nearer to depicting the American scene than many a laborious, cornfed realist."²

In this same review was the observation that "Mr. Van Vechten surely grows more shrewd (with a shrewdness not in the least banal or transparent), and in Fire-crackers he displays a new and impressive strength in the death of Ella Nattatorrini." W. Somerset Maugham, writing Van Vechten on August 13, 1925, expressed a similar judgment: "I was delighted to resume my acquaintance with your wonderful countess and I think her death-bed is one of the best bits of ironic writing that I have ever read." It is satisfying to find such recognition for the interpolated scene in which the half-delirious and dying Countess frantically attempts to overcome the ravages of sickness and old age in what proves to be the

¹Ibid., p. 138.

²Louis Bromfield, "The New Yorker," Bookman, LXII (Oct., 1925), p. 196.

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 In this *Yield* we see the same old story, the
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¹ *Ibid.*, p. 138.
² *Book* Bromfield, "The New Yorker," *Book*, 1925, p. 138.
 (Oct., 1925), p. 138.

vain hope that the holy father arriving to render her last rites would be a young priest. It is a scene of "impressive strength," but it was not new; it was the strength of ironic tragedy felt for Lennie Colman, Ella's maiden sister, Lou Poore, and Ella Poore Nattatorrini herself in The Tattooed Countess.¹ What Firecrackers lacked, except for this attached interlude, was the force and depth of imaginative realization which made characters, situations, and their ironic handling so memorable in Van Vechten at his best. He had proven that his method could successfully tread the middleground between melange and melodrama. Firecrackers was a retreat towards the former.

Nigger Heaven

On the evening of March 30, 1914, Van Vechten witnessed a New York production of Ridgely Torrence's Granny Maumee, an early attempt to portray the Negro

¹F. Scott Fitzgerald was one of many readers who preferred the Campaspe novels. After reading Firecrackers, he wrote Van Vechten (July 27, 1925) with his usual lack of attention to spelling: "With the Blind Bow Boy I like it best of your four novels--it seems to me that this rather than The Tatoed Countess is your true line of genius--in Campaspe for example you suggest so much more than you say--she is the embodiment of New York, mysterious and delectate and entirely original, while Countess Nattatorrini for all the amazing and virtuosic details about her past was really a 'character'."

from his own point of view. "Immediately," he later wrote, "I was seized with the idea of founding a real Negro theatre, in which Negroes should act in real Negro plays."¹ Twelve years later, as the author of Nigger Heaven, he carried the idea into fiction.

There was a good deal in the background of the writer to bring such a book into being. His father had helped found a school for Negroes. At least two of his favorite authors had written of Negroes, Gertrude Stein in "Melanctha" of Three Lives, and Ronald Firbank in Prancing Nigger. Personal acquaintance had made him an intimate friend of the Negro world of Harlem and New York City. Since the years before World War I he had been developing an interest in, and knowledge of, Harlem, with Van Vechten going to Harlem and Harlem coming to the Van Vechten apartment. He would introduce Negro entertainers who had won his enthusiasm to his white friends at gatherings everywhere. He read widely in the works of Negro writers: Charles W. Chesnutt, James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, W. E. B. Du Bois, Jesse Fauset, Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, and others both old and new. In all his experience with the American Negro he found evidence of an amazing culture full-blown

¹In the Garret, p. 319.

from his own point of view. "Immediately," he later wrote, "I was seized with the idea of writing a book on Negro theatre, in which Negroes should not in most Negro plays." Twelve years later, as the author of Black Heaven, he carried the idea into action.

There was a good deal in the background of the writer to bring such a book into being. His father had helped found a school for Negroes. At least two of his favorite authors had written of Negroes. He had been in "Melanctha" of Three Rivers, and House of the Francis Wright. Personal acquaintance had made him an intimate friend of the Negro world of Harlem and New York City. Since the years before World War I he had been developing an interest in, and knowledge of, Harlem, with Van Vechten going to Harlem and Harlem going to the Van Vechten apartment. He would introduce Negro entertainers who had won his enthusiasm to his circle of friends at gatherings everywhere. He read widely in the works of Negro writers: Charles L. Johnson, James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, E. R. U. Davis, Jesse Farness, Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, and others both old and new. In all his experience with the Negro he found evidence of an amazing culture full of

in the contrasts of its extremes, already distinct in its color and accomplishment, yet struggling in a white world to be what it had already become. He recognized the striking anomaly of a Harlem in America, and he saw no reason to ignore its presence. As a part of the American scene, it made much of its competition pale and dreary. Widely known was its sensational element of raw existence and vice, but virtually unknown was the presence in Harlem of a sensitive, intellectual search for stability. That intelligent humanity had any place in American Negro life was difficult for the average American to believe. It was the missing link which separated Harlem from the United States in the national mind, but it was missing only in the record of passion and violence that comprised the folklore conception of Harlem; actually it was there. A book which would reproduce the sprawl of Harlem, with accurate representation allotted to the diverse segments of its society, needed to be written. Such a book demanded a writer who could speak without condescension, who could weave coherent patterns from the tremendous contrasts in persons and scenes to be discovered in Harlem life. To be an honest representation, and to reach the very audience whose misconceptions it meant to alter, it had to offer

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the colors, sensations, and passions of Harlem in the proportions actually present. Carl Van Vechten was its man.¹

Nigger Heaven is part sociological tract, part intellectual history, part aesthetic anthropology, but it is all novel. Van Vechten was well aware of the possibility that such a compound might explode on contact with the air of prejudice which polluted the American atmosphere. He asked Alfred Knopf, his publisher, to give the book a long and careful build-up:

Ordinarily. . . books should not be advertised so long in advance, but this book is different. It is necessary to prepare the mind not only of my own public, but of the new public which this book may possibly reach, particularly that public which lies outside New York. If they see the title, they will ask questions, or read 'The New Negro' or something, so that the kind of life² I am writing about will not come as an actual shock.

To assure the authenticity of his treatment of Negro life and character, he studied and collected, at first

¹ Joseph Hergesheimer's tribute in a letter to Van Vechten (Aug. 23, 1926) indicates the success of this method: "Nigger Heaven is really an objective novel, a thing so rare as to be unique. This is specially a generation of easy autobiography, novels now are hardly more than shapeless collections of personal and irrelevant ideas and prejudices. . . . You have taken the simplest arrangement possible, the oldest and perhaps most valid of the stories, and made it absolutely serve your purpose. This, it appears to me, is the most that can be done."

² Alfred A. Knopf, "Reminiscences of Hergesheimer, Van Vechten, and Mencken," Yale University Library Gazette, XXIV (April, 1950), 153.

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Walter Houghton is a very intelligent, broad, and
intellectual history, but, nevertheless, and perhaps, one of
its all novel. Van Vechten was with a sense of the novel
difficulty that such a compound might require, on occasion,
with the air of pretentiousness which followed the modern
atmosphere. He asked himself, "What is the novel?"
Give the book a long and careful reading.

Ordinarily, it seems as though not an advertisement
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¹ Joseph Houghton's critique in a letter to
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can be done."

² Alfred A. Knopf, "Essentialism of the Novel,"
Van Vechten, and Houghton, "The University of Chicago
Gazette, XLIV (April, 1925) 173.

and second hand, a mass of documentary material.¹ As a final check he submitted the manuscript to Rudolph Fisher and James Weldon Johnson before publication. But, as James Branch Cabell foresaw when he wrote Van Vechten on August 15, 1926, "I hopefully await the row this book must almost inevitably arouse in all camps," the explosion took place anyway.

On both sides of the imaginary fence at 110th street, which Van Vechten had hoped to whittle down, controversy raged. Generally, the white critic was favorable, the Negro critic, to Van Vechten's dismay, adverse, although there was disagreement on all sides. The extremes of the white reaction are represented by the sour, unqualified opinion of D. H. Lawrence: "It is a false book by an author who lingers in nigger cabarets hoping to heaven to pick up something to write about and make a sensation--and, of course, money";² and Ellen Glasgow's decision that "the roots of this book cling below the shallow surface of sophistication in some rich soil of humanity. . . . That the book attempts to prove nothing, that it does not masquerade as ethnology

¹This material was the basis for The James Weldon Johnson Collection of Negro Arts and Letters, established, and since augmented considerably, at Yale University.

²D. H. Lawrence, Phoenix, the Posthumous Papers of D. H. Lawrence (New York: The Viking Press, 1936), p. 361.

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¹This material was...
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²D. H. Lawrence, *Phoenix*, the...
 of D. H. Lawrence (New York: The...)
 p. 301.

in the fancy dress of a novel, that it points no moral and preaches no doctrine of equality--this absence of prophetic gesture makes 'Nigger Heaven' only the more impressive as a sincere interpretation of life."¹ Eric Walrond saw the novel in proper perspective when he wrote for the Saturday Review of Literature: "'Nigger Heaven' will be pointed to as a frontier work of an enduring order. As literature with a strong social bias it prepares the way for examination of the fruits of a cultural flowering among the Negroes which is now about to emerge."²

Among the Negroes, James Weldon Johnson, Alice Dunbar Nelson, and George S. Schuyler were the only reviewers who approved the novel without reservation.³ Johnson, who wrote in his autobiography, "From the first, my belief has held that Nigger Heaven is a fine novel,"⁴ certified the fulfillment of the author's purpose in his review: "[He has] taken the material [Harlem] had offered

¹Ellen Glasgow, "The Soul of Harlem," Bookman, LXIV (Dec., 1926), 509-510.

²Eric Walrond, "The Epic of a Mood," Saturday Review of Literature, III (Oct. 2, 1926), 153.

³"A Note by the Author," Nigger Heaven (Avon Reprint Edition, 1951), n. p.

⁴James Weldon Johnson, Along This Way (New York: The Viking Press, 1933), p. 382.

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¹ Nylon Glasgow, "The Soul of America," Bookman,
 LXIV (Dec., 1926), 502-510.

² Eric Walcott, "The Epic of a Soul," Saturday
Review of Literature, III (Oct., 1926), 125.

³ A note by the author, "Nigger Heaven" (New
 Reprint Edition, 1931), p. 9.

⁴ James Nelson Johnson, Along This Way (New York:
 The Viking Press, 1933), p. 302.

him and achieved the most revealing, significant and powerful novel based on Negro life yet written. . . . The author pays colored people the rare tribute of writing about them as people rather than puppets."¹ It is clear that the title of the book alienated many Negroes--particularly those who did not read it. Langston Hughes suggests that the readers in Harlem missed the irony of Harlem seen as a "segregated gallery in a theater, the only place where Negroes could see or stage their own show," and points out that Van Vechten certainly had been more fair to the Harlemites than he had been to his home folks in The Tattooed Countess.² If this is true, Van Vechten's careful preparation of the novel was vain on still another count, for he had allowed Byron Kasson to explicate the title in one of his carefully highlighted speeches:

Nigger Heaven! That's what Harlem is. We sit in our places in the gallery of this New York theatre and watch the white world sitting down below in the good seats in the orchestra. Occasionally they turn their faces up towards us, their hard, cruel faces, to laugh or sneer, but they never beckon. It never seems to occur to them that Nigger

¹James Weldon Johnson, "Romance and Tragedy in Harlem--A Review," Opportunity, IV (Oct., 1926), 316.

²Langston Hughes, The Big Sea (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1940), p. 271.

him and achieved the most revealing, significant and powerful novel based on Negro life yet written. . . . The author says colored people the rare tribute of writing about them as people rather than pawns. "It is about that the title of the book alienated many Negroes--partly clearly those who did not read it," Langston Hughes suggests that the readers in Harlem missed the irony of Harlem seen as a "negroized gallery in a theater, the only place where Negroes could see on stage their own show," and points out that Van Veenon certainly had been more fair to the Harlemites than he had been to his home folks in the lasted country.² If this is true, Van Veenon's careful presentation of the novel was again on still another count, for he had allowed a non-Harlem to explicate the title in one of his carefully high-lighted speeches:

Higher Heaven! That's what Harlem is. It's in our place in the gallery of this New York theatre and watch the white world sitting down below in the good seats in the orchestra. Occasionally they turn their faces up towards us, their hands, cruel faces, to laugh or sneer, but they never beckon. It never seems to occur to them that higher

¹James Weldon Johnson, "Romance and Tragedy in Harlem--a Review," Opportunity, IV (Oct., 1925), 316.

²Langston Hughes, The Big Sea (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1940), p. 271.

Heaven is crowded, that there isn't another seat, that something has to be done.¹

It is clear now that those who rejected the novel did so for reasons or prejudices not inherent in the book itself. By 1930, when John Chamberlain surveyed the accomplishment of the Negro in literature, it was evident that Nigger Heaven had largely fulfilled its purposes:

The Negro may count himself fortunate that the success of Nigger Heaven helped to carry the publishers' forts for much of his work. [It] gave a powerful impetus to the novelists of Harlem; and in spite of its elements of tacked-on sophistication it succeeds in its own right, for its technique--the old wheel-technique of George Eliot--is skilful, and it is evidently close enough to the truth to receive the compliment of imitation by Negroes.²

Since then, Van Vechten's work for, with, and among American Negroes has left no doubt of his sincerity and service. The recent reprint of Nigger Heaven in a popular edition testifies to the lasting influence and value of the book.³

In his special note for the 1951 edition, Van Vechten has summarized his plot as "one of the oldest

¹Carl Van Vechten, Nigger Heaven (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1926), p. 149.

²John Chamberlain, "The Negro as Writer," Bookman, LXX (Feb., 1930), 606-607.

³The paper-bound edition for a mass market is in the Avon Pocket Size Series (New York: Avon Publishing Co., 1951).

Heaven is crowded, that there is another world, that something has to be done. It is clear now that these who rejected the novel did so for reasons of prejudice, not interest in the book itself. By 1950, when John Chamberlain attacked the accomplishment of the Negro in literature, it was evident that Nigger Heaven had largely fulfilled its purpose.

The Negro may count himself fortunate that the success of Nigger Heaven helped to bring the Negro into focus for much of the world. It gave a powerful impetus to the novelist as writer; and it split its elements of taken-on racialization in unneeded in its own right, for the Negro is a writer, and it is technique of genre fiction is skillful, and it is evidently close enough to the world to give the compliment of imitation by writers.

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¹ Carl Van Vechten, Nigger Heaven (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1950), p. 149.

² John Chamberlain, "The Negro as Writer," Bookman, LXX (Feb., 1950), 606-607.

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stories in the world, the story of the Prodigal Son, without the happy ending of that Biblical history. In my book a boy from a small town is bewitched, bothered, and bewildered by a big time Lady of Pleasure and is unable to meet the demands made on his character by life in a big city."¹ In the course of this conflict, not only the face but also the mind of Harlem is explored. Nigger Heaven is broadside in approaching its subject without sacrificing depth of characterization. The revelation of the prodigal Byron Kasson, the sensitive, tragically proud Mary Love, the queen of pleasure, Lasca Sartoris, the "Scarlet Creeper," Anatole Longfellow, and many another minor character is provocative, complex, and considerable.²

The artistic presentation of extremes in Harlem life is balanced and consistent. Opening and closing in the dissolute atmosphere of a Harlem cabaret, it ranges to serious discussions, never artificially staged, of

¹Ibid., n. p.

² Among the characterizations is a memorable glimpse of H. L. Mencken, introduced as Russett Durwood, the young editor of the "American Mars." Reminiscing about his friend, Van Vechten has since written, "I have tried to sketch a portrait of him in my novel, Nigger Heaven, but it is almost impossible to capture his personality in a few brief paragraphs." ("Random Notes on Mr. Mencken of Baltimore," Yale University Library Gazette, XXIV (April, 1950), 171.

the color problem. One of these, as credible and intelligent today as it was in 1926, involves two young couples in a Harlem apartment shared by the two girls. Its climax is symbolic of the book's tragic temper. Tiring of the circles into which such a discussion inevitably is led, Van Vechten has them turn for release and relief to a phonograph record of Clara Smith. He then reproduces five lines of the blues, "Nobody knows duh way Ah feel dis mornin'. . . ." If, as Langston Hughes has said, Van Vechten wrote "sympathetically and amusingly and well about a whole rainbow of life above 110th Street that had never before been put into the color of words,"¹ it should be added that the violet end of the spectrum was well represented.

Spider Boy

Through Carl Van Vechten's seven novels runs a consistent pattern of alternation between ironic tragedy and ironic comedy. Peter Whiffle, the only one which fits its category loosely, was followed by the light antics of The Blind Bow-Boy; The Tattooed Countess was given the confection of Firecrackers as its dessert; after Nigger Heaven came the gay spoofing of Hollywood

¹Langston Hughes, The Big Sea, p. 271.

the color problem. One of these, as credible and interesting today as it was in 1930, involves two young couples in a Harlem apartment shared by the two girls. The climax is symbolic of the book's tragic theme. Luring of the circles into which such a discussion inevitably is led. Van Vechten has them turn for release and relief to a phonograph record of Clara Smith. He then reproduces five lines of the blues, "Nobody knows how it feels this mornin' . . .". It, as Langston Hughes has said, Van Vechten wrote "sympathetically and accurately and well about a whole rainbow of life above Fifth Street that had never before been put into the color of words," it should be added that the violet end of the spectrum was well represented.

Spider Boy

Through Carl Van Vechten's seven novels there is consistent pattern of alternation between ironic tragedy and ironic comedy. Peter Whiffle, the only one which fits its category loosely, was followed by the light antics of The Blind Boy; The fatuous Gennep was given the sanction of Fireworks as its successor; after After Heaven came the gay spoofing of Hollywood

¹Langston Hughes, The Sign, p. 241.

in Spider Boy; and Parties, in its way the most tragic of them all, concluded the sequence.

The comic relief Van Vechten supplied after his Harlem drama was the lightest of them all. The gaily colored balloons of the "Campaspe novels" were at least inflated with New York air; into Spider Boy he put the helium of Hollywood. His 1928 balloon flew high, but not blind. Van Vechten had been to Hollywood in the winter of 1926-1927. He saw a good deal of the Fitzgeralds who lived in an adjoining bungalow of the Ambassador. He made the acquaintance of many of the film stars, including Greta Garbo, and formed more intimate friendships with Aileen Pringle, Carmel Myers, and Lois Moran. While he didn't work in Hollywood, he did familiarize himself with the industry, the colony, and its people. Four Van Vechten articles on the film capital made a tandem appearance in Vanity Fair as a result of this visit and as a prelude to Spider Boy: "Fabulous Hollywood" (May, 1927), "Hollywood Parties" (June, 1927), "Hollywood Royalty" (July, 1927), and "Understanding Hollywood" (August, 1927). He had absorbed with amusement the peculiarities that set Hollywood apart from the rest of the world. It was fitting, then, that everything in Spider Boy took on size without gaining stature.

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ment the peculiarities that set Hollywood apart from the
rest of the world. It was fitting, then, that everything
in Spider Boy took on also without gaining stature.

The novel opens with the presentation of a New York-bred situation that has the whimsical stamp of Van Vechten's irony. Ambrose Deacon, already a successful, comfortable, but little known writer, has been hailed as a new literary genius because of his highly-successful first play, written without pretense or self-conscious art. On this account he has been besieged by critics, intellectual admirers, and the press in quest of his method, his artistic creeds, his techniques of form and style. As a consequence, the utterly ingenuous Ambrose becomes so self-conscious he can no longer write. Like the Countess Nattatorrini, Ambrose Deacon is leaving the scene of his discomfort in the hope that simpler, more peaceful surroundings will renew his spirits and his balance. As in The Tattooed Countess, the narration is begun on a train moving westward across America, but unlike that novel, the farther from New York it moves the less it fulfills the promise of its opening; for the innocent Ambrose, on his way to the rough adobe home of a friend in Santa Fe, encounters a mad group of movie folk on his train and is unwillingly whisked to the plaster palaces of Hollywood. The hilarity which ensues is an extravagant satire of the kingdom of the movies in the year 1928.

The novel opens with the presentation of a New York-bred situation that has the whimsical stamp of Van Vechten's irony. Ambrose, however, already a successful comfortless, but little known writer, has been hailed as a new literary genius because of his highly-sensational first play, written without pretense or self-consciousness. On this account he has been besieged by critics, labelled a sensation, and the press in quest of his method, his artistic credo, his technique of form and style. As a consequence, the utterly impetuous Ambrose becomes so self-conscious he can no longer write. Like the Countess Westbury, Ambrose begins by leaving the scene of his discomforts in the hope that a change, more peaceful surroundings will renew his spirit and his balance. As in the Countess's case, the narrative is begun on a train moving westward across America, but unlike that novel, the farther from New York he moves the less he fulfills the promise of his opening; for the innocent Ambrose, on his way to the rough shore home of a friend in Santa Fe, encounters a bad group of movie folk on his train and is unwittingly whisked to the glittering palaces of Hollywood. The rivalry which ensues is an extravagant satire of the kingdom of the movies in the year 1928.

The first (almost the only) resident (there are no natives) of that realm who does not take Hollywood seriously is Capa Nolin, a girl writer. In the sketch of her environment which she gives the meek, astonished Ambrose, she outlines in brief the subject, the type and the manner of the book's satire: ". . .most of the houses out here are made of stucco. You can kick your foot right through them. You can kick your foot right through everything else here too. Nothing is real, except the police dogs and the automobiles, and usually those aren't paid for. To be concrete, there are no stenographers at the studios: they're all secretaries."¹

In regard to sexual transgressions, the comedy is tastefully circumspect, lampooning the self-conscious amours of the promiscuous colony, but never stooping to record any earthy details. Ambrose Deacon, like the perpetual male fugitive of Thorne Smith's alcoholic novels, is pursued to his constant dismay by females, desirous of alliance with his name, talent, or influence; but he is eventually caught by Wilhelmina Ford, who, while she could not be judged normal (no one in Spider Boy is normal), is attracted to him for reasons of a less selfish nature.

¹Carl Van Vechten, Spider Boy (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1928), p. 100.

The first (almost the only) resident (there are no natives) of that realm who does not take Hollywood seriously is Cary Nelson, a girl writer. In the sketch of her environment which she gives the most, astonished Ambrose, she outlines in brief the subject, the type and the manner of the book's activity. "Most of the houses out here are made of stone. You can kick your foot right through them. You can kick your foot right through everything else here too. Nothing is real, except the police dogs and the automobiles, and usually those aren't paid for. To be concrete, there are no stenographers at the studios; they're all secretaries." In regard to sexual transgressions, the comedy is taste-fully circumspiced, lampooning the self-conscious manner of the promiscuous colony, but never stooping to record any earthy details. Ambrose Deason, like the perpetual male fugitive of Thomas Smith's alcoholic novels, is pursued to his constant dismay by females, desirous of alliance with his name, talent, or influence; but he is eventually caught by Wilhelmina Ford, who, while she could not be judged normal (no one in Spider Boy is normal), is attracted to him for reasons of a less selfish nature.

A comparatively sane interlude in New Mexico, occasioned by Deacon's temporary escape from the egocentric society of Hollywood, graces the novel by sliding casually, although inconsistently, into the middle of the tale. By arriving thus briefly in Santa Fe, the book manages to inject some of the color of New Mexico scenes which Van Vechten has seen and photographed so memorably during his own visits there. The adobe home of Jack Story, the friend of Ambrose Deacon, was probably conditioned by Mabel Dodge Luhan's house in Taos, with its flock of white pigeons wheeling around outside, and its interior details of vigas overhead and objects of Indian and Spanish art placed about. A visit by Ambrose to an Indian pueblo is presented with respect visible beneath the comic turn of its prose. One almost wishes that Ambrose Deacon had taken a later train out of New York so that his tale could have been told in the setting of its original destination.

Spider Boy is good fun, however, and the reviewers who tossed it aside with heavy contempt missed the humorous twist of its double-tongued subtitle, "A Scenario for a Motion Picture." Clifton Fadiman was the most outspoken of these. His review read in part: "His satire is without sparkle or good nature and is so obvious that the attentive reader. . .scents it twenty pages ahead.

On the whole, Mr. Van Vechten is a mediocre reporter of the smart cracks of five years ago and a fairly good purveyor to the appetites of upper-class fourteen-year-olds."¹ The reviewer for the London Times Literary Supplement was another who ignored the parody in Van Vechten's book: "There are passages in this new novel of his in which he descends to rather wanton farce, moments in which his humor is of precisely the slapstick variety favoured by Hollywood."² In addition to misinterpreting the author's satirical method, these readers deprived themselves of a good time by refusing not to take the novel seriously. Its author, within the rather flexible limits of his irony, didn't. Certainly its characters didn't. Its finale, while promising a more substantial volume should there be a sequel, tossed off the book it concluded with an impudence that characterized the whole project. Wilhelmina, done with Hollywood, rejected Ambrose's suggestion that they leave crowds, success, and fame, and retire together to a peaceful Cambodia. They were going to New York, the ex-Kansas girl declared! "I want to meet George Gershwin and

¹Clifton Fadiman, Bookman, LXVIII (Oct., 1928), 223.

²London Times Literary Supplement (Aug. 23, 1928), p. 604.

On the whole, Mr. Van Vechten is a welcome reporter of the smart cracks of five years ago and a fairly good purveyor to the appetites of novel-readers four years old.¹ The reviewer for the London Times lately

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¹ Clifton Fadiman, Bookman, LXXII (Oct., 1953).

² London Times Literary Supplement, Nov. 27, 1953.

Jimmy Walker and Percy Hammond and Mencken and Alfred Lunt and Theodore Dreiser and Fred Astaire and Carl Van Vechten and Paul Robeson and Scott Fitzgerald and Gene Tunney and. . .Cambodia! Why, we might as well live in Kansas City.

"Ambrose Deacon groaned."

Parties

If F. Scott Fitzgerald's This Side of Paradise served as a literary overture to the "Roaring Twenties," Carl Van Vechten's last novel, Parties (1930), was even more clearly its coda. The place of the latter in a literary history of the decade is the more secure for the conscious purpose of its author. Fitzgerald was not aware at the time that he had provided a bible of flaming youth. Van Vechten was fully aware that he was conducting a wake, both for the giddy era and for his own gay cycle of novels. A special irony arises from the fact that David and Rilda Westlake, the central characters of Van Vechten's book, are partially based on Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald.¹ In chronicling the alcoholic revolution of their dizzy, tragic merry-go-round existence, he succeeded in capturing the comic but grotesque spectacle

¹Carl Van Vechten to Edward Lueders, Sept. 20, 1950.

Jimmy Walker and Percy Hammond and Newman and Alfred
Lunt and Theodore Dreiser and Fred Astaire and Bill
Veckten and Paul Robeson and Joseph P. Kamp and John
Tunney and . . . (Cambridge, Mass., no date as yet) 1950
Kansas City.

"Ambrose Besson produced."

References

1. F. Scott Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise*

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of novels. A special irony arises from the fact that
David and Rilla Westlake, the central characters of Van
Vechten's book, are basically based on Scott and Zelda
Fitzgerald.¹ In chronological and stylistic revolution
of their dizzy, tragic twenty-year-old existence, they
succeeded in capturing the world and guaranteeing

¹ Carl Van Vechten to Howard Chandler Christy, 1950.

of a bewildered society dancing at its own funeral, while his own demeanor as its literary choreographer was sobered by the realization that it was a closing performance. "It's just like the opening chorus of an opera bouffe," one of the characters remarks gaily at the impromptu morning cocktail gathering which concludes Parties, "all of us here clinking glasses like villagers on the green." "Somehow its more like the closing chorus," retorts another. "I think we're all a little tired."

Van Vechten's sense of form and proportion is as effective in Parties as it is in The Tattooed Countess. Its sputtering, bewildered, semi-coherent first three chapters are a sparkling representation of a drunken New York society, living from moment to moment and from drink to drink, not knowing quite what had happened, what was happening, or what would happen, but keeping the glitter and glibness of the immediate present forever animated. In the center of the novel is placed the only sober dialogue of any length. It takes place quite properly against the backdrop of sunlight illuminating the apartment of David and Rilda Westlake. This sophisticated but explosively matched couple is allowed to pause in the light of noon before they plunge back into the chaos of their frenetic existence. David delivers himself

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in the light of noon before they plunge back into the
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of practically the whole theme and plot of the novel in one outburst:

We're swine, filthy swine, and we are Japanese mice, and we are polar bears walking from one end of our cage to the other, to and fro, to and fro, all day, all week, all month, for ever to eternity. We'll be drunk pretty soon and then I'll be off to Donald's to get drunker and you'll be off with Siegfried and get drunker and we'll go to a lot of cocktail parties and then we'll all turn up for dinner at Rosalie's where you are never invited. She won't want you, and I shall hate you, but Siegfried will want you. And we'll get drunker and drunker and drift about night clubs so drunk that we won't know where we are, and then we'll go to Harlem and stay up all night and go to bed late tomorrow morning and wake up and begin it all over again.¹

Parties, sighed Rilda. Parties!¹

From this occasion of disturbing illumination, the characters return to the alcoholic merry-go-round which restores with its perpetual circular motion their customary moral vertigo. Only once more is the ride interrupted by a moment of moral judgment, when a clairvoyant Negro woman, hired to entertain at a party, gives each member of the company (except the elusive David and Rilda) a moral reading, brief but direct, of his soul. Her portraiture too accurate, she is dismissed summarily before her revelations can be completed.

Parties is the only one of Van Vechten's novels which does not go anywhere. It concludes where it began,

¹Carl Van Vechten, Parties (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1930), p. 87.

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We're swine, filthy swine, and we are Japanese mice, and we are polar bears waiting from one end of our cage to the other, to and fro, to and fro, all day, all week, all month, for ever to eternity. We'll be drunk pretty soon and then I'll be off to Donald's to get drunker and you'll be off with sliced and get drunker and we'll go to a lot of cock-tail parties and then we'll all turn up for dinner at Rosalie's where you are never invited. She won't want you, and I shall hate you, but sliced will want you. And we'll get drunker and drunker and drift about right like so drunk that we won't know where we are, and then we'll go to Harlem and stay up all night and go to bed late tomorrow morning and wake up and begin it all over again. Parties, sliced Hilda, parties!

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¹Carl Van Veughten, Parties (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1930), p. 67.

with nothing conclusive but the telling exposition of scene, character, and atmosphere. Its narrative is diverting and compelling throughout, but, save for the death of Roy Fern, a minor character with major attachments, and its consequences, there is no "working-out"; nothing is, in the usual sense, accomplished. This is perhaps its most consistent feature and reveals as much as any technique could about the subject of the book. To its strange timelessness, the sameness of scene, the drunken ride on a merry-go-round in which the changing view revolves but never alters, is added a sense of anomalous anachronism, subtly carried from the prophetic chaos of the opening chapters to the later action of the book. The most striking instance of this is the disordered prophecy and fulfillment surrounding the death of Roy Fern, the bootlegger's flunky, fatally addicted to cocaine. In the incoherent hysteria of the opening pages, David Westlake cries, "I've killed a man or a man has killed me. There were three of us on the stairs. I mean. . .O God!" Donald Bliss, the boy's employer, calls later to report, fallaciously, that Roy Fern had been killed. This prophecy, appropriately distorted through alcoholic visions, is fulfilled in Chapter Fourteen when Roy, drugged and deluded that he is

with nothing conclusive but the telling exposition of scene, character, and atmosphere. Its narrative is diverting and compelling throughout, and, save for the death of Roy Kern, a minor character with major attachment, and its consequences, there is no "working-out"; nothing is, in the usual sense, accomplished. This is perhaps its most consistent feature and reveals as much as any technique could about the subject of the book. To its strange timelessness, the sameness of scene, the drunken ride on a merry-go-round in which the changing view revolves but never alters, is added a sense of eternal anachronism, subtly carried from the prophetic chaos of the opening chapters to the later action of the book. The most striking instance of this is the disordered prophecy and fulfillment surrounding the death of Roy Kern, the bootlegger's flunky, fatally addicted to cocaine. In the incoherent hysteria of the opening pages, David Westlake cries, "I've killed a man or a man has killed me. There were three of us on the stairs. I mean . . . O God!" Donald Rides, the boy's employer, calls later to report, falteringly, that Roy Kern had been killed. This prophecy, appropriately distorted through alcoholic visions, is fulfilled in Chapter Fourteen when Roy, drugged and deluded that he is

defending David, stabs a rival and plunges down the stairs to his death in his wild attempt to escape.

Characters in the novel are extravagant and memorable. David and Rilda are supported by a vivid cast of dipsomaniacs: Bliss, the handsome bootlegger, and Roy, the snow bird; Beauty Butcher, the speakeasy pianist, and Simone Fly resembling "a gay Death," who was given to adding inane contributions to conversations, dropping liquor-filled glasses, and emitting as her perpetual expletive, "Blaaa!" There is Hamish Wilding, whose sobering concern for David and Rilda luckily allows him to report the antics of others too drunk to report for themselves. The foreign element is represented by Noma Ridge, "a young English girl with dimpled, rosy cheeks who did not drink or smoke, but who atoned for the lack of these semi-precious vices by describing in an endless monotone the various forms of her amorous transports and the characteristics of the persons with whom she enjoyed them," and the aged Gräfin von Pulmernl und Stilzernl, who finds calm Old World pleasure in the frantic perversions of America. This distance qualifies her to deliver the final irony when she brings the book to its close, chuckling, "It is so funny, David, so very funny, and I love your country."

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Characters in the novel are extravagant and

memorable. David and Alice are suggested by a vivid

cast of dispositions: Alice, the handsome bookish

and boy, the snow bird; Henry, the awkward

placid, and Simon, the "gay Death," who

was given to adding ironic contributions to conversations,

dropping finger-tipped glasses, and smiling as her gar-

gued explosive, "Alice!" There is Hamish Willing,

whose sobering concern for David and Alice finally allows

him to report the antics of others too drunk to report

for themselves. The foreign element is represented by

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funny, and I love your country."

The last character to be introduced is the forgotten eight-year-old son of David and Rilda. Encountering Hamish in the Westlake apartment, he blurts out the wish that his parents would drink less--he might see them at home occasionally then. The child's name, through no chance, we can be sure, is Regent. Someone had to take care of things until his parents grew up.

It is interesting to note in Van Vechten's final novel the tendency to return in some portions to the earlier style and manner of his essays. Some chapters open with three or four pages of exposition devoted to an appropriate theme--the rapid, continuous mutations of New York City, or the colorful "Lindy Hop" ("Of all the dances yet originated by the American Negro, this the most nearly approaches the sensation of religious ecstasy")--before they pick up the hectic narrative again. The device has a genuine warming effect on a novel that otherwise relies on the false heat generated by alcoholic intoxication. In addition, it allows the reader to separate the author from the ephemeral futility of the scenes he portrayed, a process which Carl Van Vechten, in the most morally inclined of his ironic tragedies, clearly recognized as inevitable and necessary.

Oddly enough, the critics displayed less understanding of Van Vechten's purposes and methods in Parties

than they had for any of his other novels. Most reviewers, for reasons difficult to imagine, ignored its moral implications, possibly because while moral questions were manifest to the author throughout the book, the author was never self-conscious about presenting them as didactic disquisitions. Some readers, like Fanny Butcher, merely expressed general disappointment: "'Parties'," she wrote, "is, to this reader's mind, the least of the works of Mr. Van Vechten."¹ Harry Hansen, concerned only with the surface froth, wrote, "Parties is in his best manner, free from the seriousness of *Nigger Heaven*, reminiscent of *The Blind Bow Boy* and *The Tattooed Countess*."² Others lamented with Clinton Simpson, "that he uses his talents for books such as this one, which is flippant at best and occasionally a little--even more than little--cheap."³ The most myopic and unkind of all was the reviewer for the *New York Times*, who, blithely disregarding the years and events which separated *Peter Whiffle* and *Parties* as well as missing the ironic moral tragedy in the novel, wrote, "A book as unsavory and

¹ *Chicago Tribune* (Aug. 16, 1930), p. 4.

² *New York World* (Aug. 15, 1930), p. 9.

³ Clinton Simpson, *Saturday Review of Literature*, VII (Sept. 6, 1930), 101.

than they had for any of his other novels. Most reviewers for reasons difficult to imagine, ignored the moral implications, possibly because while moral questions were manifest to the author throughout the book, the author was never self-conscious about presenting them as objective discussions. Some readers, like Fanny Hatcher, merely expressed general disappointment: "Parties," she wrote, "is, to this reader's mind, the least of the works of Mr. Van Vechten."¹ Harry Hansen, concerned only with the surface froth, wrote, "Parties is in his best manner, free from the seriousness of *Nigger Heaven*, reminiscent of *The Blind Bow Boy* and *The Tattered Town*."² Others lamented with blinded optimism, "that he uses his talents for books such as this one, which is flippant at best and occasionally a little—even more than little—cheap."³ The most myopic and unkind of all was the reviewer for the *New York Times*, who, diffidently disregarding the years and events which separated *Parties* and *Whiffle and Parties* as well as missing the ironic moral tragedy in the novel, wrote, "A book as unconvincing and

¹ *Chicago Tribune* (Aug. 16, 1930), p. 4.

² *New York World* (Aug. 15, 1930), p. 9.

³ *Criticon* (Sept. 6, 1930), 101. *Saturday Review of Literature*.

sniggering as it is dull. It is something of a shock that a man so well acquainted with the arts as Mr. Van Vechten should so far have forgotten himself as to spin out this tasteless and specious tale."¹ Perhaps this reception of Parties was an appropriately ironic climax to Van Vechten's career as a novelist. In any event, it appears indicative twenty years later of the reluctance with which the generation of the Twenties viewed itself at the end of the decade.

With Parties, the series of seven novels in nine years was completed. Individually, they had been sources of amusement, novelty, edification, shock, and sophistication to a decade that constantly sought these qualities in both life and literature. Collectively, as George Dangerfield has observed, they constitute a comedy of manners for their accelerated era.² Parties demonstrated that a fate similar to that which befell an earlier comedy of manners also climaxed that of the Twenties; its own excess brought from within a change from the unmoral to the moral.

¹New York Times (Aug. 17, 1930), p. 6.

²George Dangerfield, in his review of Parties, wrote, ". . .it should establish what one believes to be the truth--namely that the body of Van Vechten's work, whether good, bad, or indifferent, represents in its own way a modern comedy of manners." Bookman, LXXII (Sept. 1930), 71-72.

anxious as it is half. It is a matter of course that a man so well acquainted with the art of the Venetian should so far have forgotten himself as to put out this tasteless and stupid article. The reception of Pappas was an extraordinary event, from the to Van Veen's career as a novelist. It is a fact that appears indicative of the state of the mind with which the generation of the late nineteenth century at the end of the century.

With Pappas, the career of even more than nine years was completed. In the meantime, the sources of amusement, novelty, education, and sophistication to a society that constantly sought for qualities in both life and literature. Pappas, as George Bancroft has observed, they could find a comedy of manners for their amusement and demonstration that a false standard of what was earlier comedy of manners than of the past. Pappas; its own excess brought it to a point from the immoral to the moral.

¹New York Times (Aug. 17, 1890), p. 1.

²George Bancroft, in his review of Pappas, wrote, "It is a good thing that one should be the truth--namely that the body of Van Veen's work, whether good, bad, or indifferent, remains in its own way a modern comedy of manners." ibid. (1890), 71-72.

The artistic philosophy of composition which is found in the series was symbolized in the title of its middle member, Firecrackers. Following the method of this figure, all seven novels may be quickly appraised. Peter Whiffle, with its variety of effects, comes closest to the colorful displays of a professional pyrotechnician. The Blind Bow-Boy, Firecrackers, and Spider Boy, lacking the substance and impact of the others, go off like a hopping string of fireworks. The Tattooed Countess, Nigger Heaven, and Parties, with the added preparation, suspense, and heightened effect of larger explosives, have wicks which sizzle and spark enticingly before they go off with a report loud and singular enough to sound echoes for some time to come.

The artistic philosophy of composition which is
found in the series was exemplified in the title of the
middle member, Firestorm. Following the theme of
this figure, all seven novels now be briefly explained.
Peter Whiffle, with its variety of style and color, refers
to the colorful display of a professional symphony.
The Blind Bow-boy, Firestorm, and Firestorm
the substance and impact of the first of the series
hopping string of fireworks. The second novel
Nigger Heaven, and Harlem, with the third novel
suspense, and heightened effect of the first novel.
have which which style and color and which which
go off with a report loud and singular enough to sound
echoes for some time to come.

CHAPTER IV

SOCIETY

In 1922, a thirty-man symposium was published under the ambitious title, Civilization in the United States.¹ Its table of contents broke the title into thirty segments, each represented by an individual essay and an individual author. The subjects were The City, Politics, Journalism, The Law, Education, Scholarship and Criticism, School and College Life, The Intellectual Life, Science, Philosophy, The Literary Life, Music, Poetry, Art, The Theatre, Economic Opinion, Radicalism, The Small Town, History, Sex, The Family, The Alien, Racial Minorities, Advertising, Business, Engineering, Nerves, Medicine, Sport and Play, and Humour. Representative contributors to the symposium were Lewis Mumford, H. L. Mencken, John Macy, Robert Morss Lovett, Joel Spingarn, Harold Stearns (also the editor), Van Wyck Brooks, Deems Taylor, Conrad Aiken, George Jean Nathan, Hendrik Van Loon, Elsie Clews Parsons and Ring Lardner. Together, their survey of America was disturbing and significant. Their essays struggled for objectivity

¹ Harold E. Stearns, ed., Civilization in the United States (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1922).

In 1922, a thirty-year-old man was published under the ambitious title, Intellectuals in the United States.¹ Its table of contents shows the title and thirty segments, each given space for an individual name and an individual subject. The subjects were: Literature, Politics, Journalism, Education, Social Science, and Artistic, School and College, and Intellectual Life, Science, Philosophy, and Literary Life, History, Poetry, Art, The Theatre, Economic Conditions, Intellectuals, The Small Town, History, Sex, The Family, The Alien, Racial Minorities, Negroes, and Immigrants, Intellectuals, Medicine, Sport and Play, and Intellectuals, and sensitive contributions to the system were listed. Ford, H. E. Wagoner, John Ford, Robert Lewis Taylor, Joel Salinger, Harold Stearns (also the editor), and Wyck Brooks, Beama Taylor, Conrad Aiken, George Jean Nathan, Hendrik van Loon, and other persons and their together, their survey of America was distinctive and significant. Their essays struggled for objectivity

¹ Harold E. Stearns, ed., Intellectuals in the United States (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1922).

but could not remain dispassionate. They maintained hope and faith but they were seldom satisfied with the American life they discussed. They somehow fell short of evoking the whole, but that is to be expected, for most of their authors reflect themselves as much as their scene.

Oddly, the table of contents comes closer to accomplishing this than does the composite report of the essays. The thirty components of "civilization" include some that would be anomalous in any other period. Earlier eras might have added The City, Journalism, Radicalism, the Small Town, and The Family to the traditional list, but what other age would have given equal billing to Sex, Racial Minorities, Advertising, Nerves, Sport and Play, and Humor?

The table of contents tells us something else of the Twenties, too, for it lists the names of many of those, some in youth, some in middle age at the time, who led the intellectual revolt from tradition that opened the way for the era's most remarkable achievements and its most irresponsible failures, and, in the matrix of these extremes, endowed the decade with its unique personality.

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The table of contents tells us something else of the Twenties, too, for it lists the names of many of those, some in youth, some in middle age at the time, who led the intellectual revolt from tradition that opened the way for the era's most remarkable achievements and its most irresponsible failures, and, in the midst of these extremes, endowed the decade with its unique personality.

Qualifications as Observer-Reporter

In his training, his sympathies, his intellectual convictions and his personal environment, Carl Van Vechten was identified with this group. Indeed, he was intimately acquainted with most of their number. He was a personal and professional friend of Mencken, Nathan, Lovett, Taylor, Spingarn, Macy, and Stearns, to mention only a sampling of those contributing to the symposium. As a persistent habitué of the salons, social gatherings, intellectual haunts, and parties of New York, London, and Paris, he held an acquaintance among the cosmopolitan intelligentsia of his time that few could equal. Himself an exponent of experimentalism in art and aesthetic bohemia in living, he moved in the company of those intellectually and artistically dedicated to the assertion of individual expression in the face of tradition. And he moved more comfortably than most.

Oscar Cargill, in his history of intellectual America, has written that "Carl Van Vechten belongs to the Intelligentsia by his indiscriminating eclecticism, more than for any other reason. It has made his career as an intellectual peculiarly pointless, which result the clan generally applauds as the highest merit in its membership."¹ With the caution that "undiscriminating"

¹Oscar Cargill, Intellectual America, p. 508.

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¹Cesar Gergely, Intellectual America, p. 208.

is not to be read as "indiscriminate," the estimate is true; but it is a surface truth. It forgets that the human comedy can sometimes be most pointedly seen as comedy.

Peter Whiffle is the best answer to the charge of pointless eclecticism, but it is not alone. Most of Van Vechten's work both as essayist and novelist, points, sometimes unconsciously, more often purposely, to the scenes, the ideas, the personalities, the ironic paradoxes that only such an eclectic adventurer could collect and record. It is the spirit of an inveterate collector that fuses the work of Van Vechten with purpose, for he has collected and presented in his books a potpourri of his own life and times, personal collections of portraits, rare prints, handbills, diaries, program notes, manifestoes, caricatures, invitation lists, social notes, creeds, recipes, enchantments and their antidotes, menus, panaceas, picture post cards, and comic valentines, more illuminating in their diversity than any single-minded study could be. If he was the butterfly of his society instead of its gadfly, it merely meant that he was more socially acceptable; he goaded less and was allowed to observe more. If his eclectic method seemed inconsistent in a society of individuals given to narrower self-dedication, it assumed the larger purpose of absorbing the

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contrasts within that same society. Such concern for consistency, Van Vechten agreed with Emerson, was the hobgoblin of little minds; in addition, it had the trappings of tradition.

Van Vechten's most valuable asset as a commentator on his scene was his ability to identify himself with the society in which he moved, while at the same time remaining an interested, detached observer of its performances. He was a singular example of the one-man show; besides being one of the actors on stage, he was also occasionally its director, and at all times its audience. His motive, consistent with the mood of the time, was an escape from boredom in the pursuit of novelty and amusement. Unlike so many restless souls in the Twenties, he found it and captured it in the very comedy of the chase.

The Unrest of Intellectual Society
at Home and Abroad

The critical unrest and intellectual wanderlust that served as a prelude to the Twenties is present in Van Vechten's early work. His critical essays on music and the arts establish his place in the revolt of the young intellectuals. Along with Mencken and his henchmen, he could declare, "The ironclad dreadnoughts of the academic world, the reactionary artists, the dry-as-dust

contrast with that same society. Such concern for consistency, Van Vechten agreed with Emerson, was the hobgoblin of little minds; in addition, it had the trappings of tradition.

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The Unrest of Intellectual Society

At Home and Abroad

The critical unrest and intellectual wanderlust that served as a prelude to the Twenties is present in Van Vechten's early work. His critical essays on music and the arts established his place in the revolt of the young intellectuals. Along with Keats and his heroes, men, he could declare, "The intellectual breathings of the academic world, the reactionary exiles, the dry-as-dust

lecturers are constantly ignoring the most vital, the most real, the most important artists while they sing polyphonic, antiphonal, palestrinian motets in praise of men who have learned to imitate comfortably and efficiently the work of their predecessors."¹ Peter Whiffle echoed the sense of intellectual isolation that made the sensitive individual an uneasy, inarticulate prophet in the Waste Land. Like T. S. Eliot's frustrated Prufrock, he shook his head vainly at conventional answers to his questions: "I thought you would say that but that's not what I meant, that's not at all what I meant."²

The scenes and atmosphere of his experience in Europe during the turbulent months that saw the beginning of World War I are vividly recollected in his sensitive diary-essay, "July-August 1914."³ He was in Italy and France at the time, one of thousands of American tourists and self-exiled intellectuals living in the continental dream of individual escape. His companions, Mabel Dodge, her son, John Evans, Neith Hapgood and her children, and sundry personalities discouraged by the temporal

¹The Merry-Go-Round, p. 228.

²Peter Whiffle, p. 35.

³Sacred and Profane Memories, pp. 99-154.

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her son, John Evans, with his father and her mother,
and anxiety personalities disorganized by the seasonal

¹ The Merry-Go-Round, p. 228.

² Peter Whiffle, p. 55.

³ Sacred and Profane Memories, pp. 99-104.

difficulties of reality that threatened their dream, made a cosmopolitan society much like that of F. Scott Fitzgerald's haunting Tender Is the Night. The essay recreates without effort the confusion, the petulance, the resentment, and the discomfort of sophistication at bay, caught and baffled in the turbulence of an insistent reality it thought it had escaped.¹

He celebrated the American's discovery of Paris, a trend that had turned that city into a mecca for the disillusioned and inhibited intellects of the United States. Americans crossed the Atlantic in unprecedented droves to experience what John Gould Fletcher has called "the greatest market and rag fair of culture and of international license in the world."² The legends of dispossessed Americans on the Left Bank multiplied rapidly, and made the vision of an American in Paris grow more glamorous and inviting than ever. The old Life printed a cartoon during the post war rise of Left Bank society which mocked the movement at the same time that it illustrated its appeal. Four alcoholic Americans were seen

¹In all his work, Mabel Dodge is referred to as Edith Dale. This diary-like account allows one slip on page 121, however, when he writes of registering "a trunk for Mabel."

²John Gould Fletcher, Life Is My Song (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1937), p. 299.

difficulties of reality that threatened their dream, made a cosmopolitan society such like that of I. Isaac first Gerald's handling, Verdun in the Night. The essay reflects without effort the transition, the balance, the resentment, and the dissonance of socialization as they caught and belied in the turbulence of an industrial reality it thought it had escaped. I

He celebrated the American's discovery of a trend that had turned out to be a trend of the United States and limited interests of the United States. Americans crossed the Atlantic in unprecedented groves to experience what John Gould Fletcher has called "the greatest market and the fair of culture and of international license in the world." The legends of old-fashioned Americans on the left have multiplied rapidly, and made the vision of the American in a new world glamorous and inviting. The old life which a cartoon Berlin the post war rise of left bank society which mocked the movement at the same time that it illustrated its appeal. Now alcoholic Americans were seen

¹ In all the work, Nobel is referred to as Edith Davis. This story-like account allows one side on page 121, however, when he writes of resistance, "a turn for Nobel."

² John Gould Fletcher, Life Is My Song (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1937), p. 237.

at a Montparnasse bar, flanked by copies of Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises and Eugene Jolas's exile magazine, transition. "Garcon, what's that the orchestra's playing?" is the inquiry of one drunk. "Why that's the Star-Spangled Banner, sir," is the answer.¹

Readers who shared vicariously in the delights of discovering Paris were given their share of anecdotes and Parisian wares in the essays of Van Vechten, and could even assume his cosmopolitan air by agreeing with his observation that "We will never have a national music until we have national dishes and national drinks and until we like good food. It is significant that our national drinks at present are mixed drinks, the ingredients of which are foreign."² But Peter Whiffle gave them even more than they had a right to expect. Besides offering continental authenticity in its back-drops for the narrative, it interpolated whole passages devoted to the sophisticated scenes and personages of contemporary Paris. In the longest of these, the author gave five pages to events seen, places visited, occasions shared, personalities and celebrities viewed and met

¹Irene and Allen Cleaton, Books and Battles (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1937), p. 39.

²The Merry-Go-Round, pp. 152.

at a Montparnasse bar, flanked by a couple of Englishmen.
 The Sun Also Rises and Eugene Ionesco's exile residence.
Transition. "Gaston, who's that one on the left?"
 is the inquiry of one drinker. "That's the French
 Spangled Banner, sir," is the answer.
 Readers who expect a historical or political
 of discovering that there were high-class champagne and
 and Parisian wines in the days of the Revolution, and
 could even assume a responsibility of something with
 his observation that "the wine is not a national drink
 until we have national dishes and national drink and
 until we like good food. It is ridiculous that our
 national drink at present are mixed wines, the largest
 drinks of wine and foreign." But later, when he gave
 them even more than they are able to expect. "The wine
 offering continental authenticity in the new groups
 for the narrative, is interested when you have
 to the sophisticated scenes and reputation of a
 poverty Paris. In the largest of these, the author gives
 five pages to events seen, since visited, objects as
 shared, personalities and delicious views and set

¹ Ionesco and Alfred Hitchcock, 1934, and 1935
 (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1934, 1935, 1936)

² The Merry-Go-Round, 1935, 1936, 1937

(including Olive Fremstad and the Steins), a casual catalogue of the cream of Parisian experiences. It was concluded by the nonchalant remark, "In short, you will observe that I did everything that young Americans do when they go to Paris."¹

On the continent, Van Vechten absorbed the extremes of society. His impressions of backstreet Paris are perpetuated in the colorful vignette, "Au Bal Musette,"² while Peter Whiffle transcribes some of the intellectual discussions of the international set in Italy and France. Granville Hicks, in his biography of John Reed, sketches such an occasion in Europe when Reed, Robert Jones, and Van Vechten--"Mabel Dodge's jeunes gens assortis, in Miss Stein's phrase"--were together in Florence with guests coming in evenings: "There were triangular arguments between Mrs. [Muriel] Draper, Jones, and Van Vechten about painting. Van Vechten quarreled with Arthur Rubenstein and Mrs. Draper about Bach."³

¹Peter Whiffle, p. 59. More Americans have had the chance to visit Gertrude Stein because of Van Vechten than otherwise might have. Her autobiography states, "Carl Van Vechten has had a delightful habit all these years of giving letters of introduction to people who he thought would amuse Gertrude Stein. This he has done with so much discrimination that she has liked them all." Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, pp. 169-170.

²The Merry-Go-Round, pp. 125-145.

³Granville Hicks, John Reed (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1937), p. 104.

(including Olive Fremstad and the Steins), a casual catalogue of the cream of Berlinian experience. It was concluded by the nonchalant remark, "In short, you will observe that I did everything that young Americans do when they go to Paris."

On the continent, Van Vechten absorbed the extremes of society. His impressions of backstreet Paris are perpetuated in the colorful vignette, "An old woman," while Peter Whiffle's experiences some of the intellectual discussions of the international set in Italy and France. Gertrude Stein, in his biography of John Reed, sketches such an occasion in Europe when Reed, Robert Jones, and Van Vechten--"Kaiser's James Jones assortment," in Miss Stein's phrase--were together in Florence with guests coming in evening. "There were brilliant conversations between Mr. [Kaiser] Greger, Jones, and Van Vechten about painting. Van Vechten quarreled with Arthur Rubinstein and Mrs. Greger about Bach."

¹Peter Whiffle, p. 99. More Americans have had the chance to visit Gertrude Stein because of Van Vechten than otherwise might have. Her autobiography states, "Carl Van Vechten has had a delightful habit all these years of giving letters of introduction to people who he thought would amuse Gertrude Stein. This he has done with so much discrimination that she has liked them all." Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, pp. 109-110.

²The Merry-go-Round, pp. 125-126.

³Gertrude Stein, John Reed (New York: The Miller Co., 1937), p. 101.

This association with Mabel Dodge, which she has described as "a long drawn-out friendship with ups and downs in it and a good deal of sympathy and anger alternating on my part,"¹ gave Van Vechten a box seat from which to witness the parade of the intelligentsia, the artists, the reformers, the iconoclasts, and the merely eccentric who passed through her fabulous salon. Her apartment at 23 Fifth Avenue in New York was the cross-roads of our intellectual bohemia, and her villa at Florence extended its stage to international proportions. Van Vechten was an early member of her group and has remained an affectionate friend through a series of trials and misunderstandings. In the recollection of their first encounter, Mrs. Luhan has sketched in quick, deft strokes the personality he brought to her gatherings: "He seemed amused at everything; there wasn't a hint of boredom in him. 'A young soul,' I thought to myself in my superior way, as I smiled across at him. After dinner he sought me out and made gay, affectionate fun of the Armstrongs in an undertone. . . . He amused me because he had such a sense of humor and was so full of life."²

¹Movers and Shakers, p. 16.

²Ibid., p. 15.

This association with Agnes, which has been described as "a long drawn-out friendship with ups and downs in it and a good deal of sympathy and understanding on my part,"¹ gave Van Vechten a context from which to witness the parade of the intellectuals, the artists, the reformers, the iconoclasts, and the merely eccentric who passed through her famous salon. Her apartment at 25 Fifth Avenue in New York was the cross-roads of our intellectual bohemia, and her villa at Florence extended its stage to international proportions. Van Vechten was an early member of her group and has remained an affectionate friend through a series of trials and misunderstandings. In the recollection of their first encounter, Mrs. Tupper has recorded in quick, deft strokes the personality he brought to her gatherings: "He seemed amused at everything; there wasn't a hint of boredom in him. 'A young soul,' I thought to myself in my superior way, as I smiled across at him. After dinner he sought me out and made, gray, affectionate fun of me. Armstrong in an undertone. . . . He amused me because he had such a sense of humor and was so full of life."²

¹ Movers and Shakers, p. 16.

² Ibid., p. 17.

While Mabel Dodge, appearing as Edith Dale, moves through many of Van Vechten's books, it is in Peter Whiffle that her famous salon is depicted.¹ The tone is not as serious as the occasion and the people present might have wished, but in keeping with the personality of the novel and its author, it is affectionate fun-making rather than serious satire. Having suggested to Peter that he include a chapter on Edith Dale's gatherings in his book, Carl blithely does it for him in the book of Peter's which, the reader has been told, Van Vechten is writing for him. The evening is reported with emphasis on the contrasting mixture of ideas and personalities, heavy and light, serious and silly, that animated the scene. It introduces talk on art consciousness by Max Weber, the violence of labor strikes by Bill Haywood, and snatches of conversations both heated and casual. "The groups separated, came together, separated, came together, separated, came together," it concluded: "Syndicalists, capitalists, revolutionists, anarchists, artists, writers, actresses, 'perfumed with botanical creams,' feminists, and malthusians were all mixed in this strange salad."²

¹Max Eastman also includes a portrait of Mabel Dodge and her salon group in action in his novel, Venture, giving her the name, "Mary Kittredge."

²Peter Whiffle, p. 145.

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Peter that he include a chapter on this kind of thing
in his book, Carl Minsky took it for him in the name
of Peter's which, the reader has seen, was written.
is writing for him. The evening is featured with a scene
on the contrasting images of these two personalities.
heavy and light, serious and silly, that and the
scene. It introduces into the consciousness of the
reader, the violence of inner struggle by which they
and another of conversations seen heated and heated.
"The groups separated, and together, separated, and
together, separated, came to Peter's as a conclusion.
"Syndicalists, capitalists, revolutionaries, anarchists,
artists, writers, actresses, - mentioned also political
groups, 'feminists, and others' who all seemed to
this strange tale."

Max Eastman also included a portrait of Mabel Dodge and her action group in scenes in the novel, Two, giving her the name, "Mabel Dodge."

Peter Whiffle, p. 185.

By the time Mabel Dodge had become weary of her service and amusement as hostess-patroness of the intelligentsia, and had left for a new colony and a new life in Taos, New Mexico, Van Vechten had established himself as a host to the New York set, a role he has continued to play with genial success through the endless search for parties in the Twenties and the more sober needs for a gathering place in the Thirties and Forties. Firecrackers kept his readers informed of "Edith Dale" by noting Campaspe Lorillard's reflection, upon receiving a letter from her, that she "seemed content to remain indefinitely in the rambling, Spanish house she had built for herself on a plateau in New Mexico."¹

In that same novel he added a more decisive comment on the perversity, irony, and contradiction in a society which inspired dedicated individuals to devote their careers to causes. In a speech about the efficacy of preachers, professors, and reformers, Gunnar O'Grady exclaims, "Why Margaret Sanger has actually turned a great many people against birth-control, and William Jennings Bryan has probably interested a great many people in drinking, and John Roach Straton and John Sumner are excellent guides to the pseudo-vices, and the

¹Firecrackers, pp. 68-69.

By the time Mabel Dodge had become weary of her service and amusement as hostess-patroness of the intellectualists, and had left for a new colony and a new life in Texas, New Mexico, San Francisco had established himself as a host to the New York set, a role he has continued to play with general success through the endless seasons for parties in the Twenties and the more sober needs for a gathering place in the Thirties and Forties. ¹ Cracklers kept his readers informed of "Little Italy" noting Campaigne Dorrill's reflection, upon receiving a letter from her, that she "seemed content to remain indefinitely in the vicinity, spending hours and had built for herself on a plateau in New Mexico."

In that same novel he shed a more decisive comment on the perversity, irony, and contradiction in a society which inspired dedicated individuals to devote their careers to causes. In a speech about the efficacy of preachers, professors, and reformers, General Grady exclaims, "Why kangaroo cages has actually turned a great many people against birth-control, and William Jennings Bryan has probably interested a great many people in drinking, and John Ross Johnston and John Sumner are excellent guides to the pseudo-vices, and the

¹ Cracklers, pp. 68-69.

Republicans make men good Democrats, and the Democrats make men good Republicans."¹ Entertained and amused and often sympathetically attracted by causes and their exponents, Van Vechten usually maintained a detached critical awareness of their excess and self-conscious consistency of purpose. Occasionally, this attitude led to a supercilious dismissal of anything that took definite form and character, but always it recognized the follies of a rigid point of view. An example of both is found in an assessment of contemporary literary criticism expressed in a letter to Emily Clark. Discussing the work of a young critic writing for the Reviewer, he predicted a brilliant future "when he begins to realize that the middle radicals and the young intellectuals and the ultra-virile adolescents and even the homosexuals are frequently just as silly (or even sillier) as (or than) Sherman and More."²

American Bohemia: A Pale but Earnest

Reflection of a Continental

Way of Life

The Twenties in the United States produced an

¹Ibid., p. 50.

²Emily Clark, Innocence Abroad, p. 136.

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American Bohemia: A Fair but Harsh

Reflection of a Continental

Way of Life

The Twenties in the United States produced an

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

² Emily Clark, *Innocence Abroad*, p. 136.

adolescent, imitation decadence that is peculiar in a historical sense. The word sits uneasily on the era, but it is nonetheless applicable to many aspects of its society. It featured contempt for the standards, morals, traditional restrictions on thought and conduct, and the sense of wholeness inherited from the past. It bred national neurosis and a dedication to the pleasures of the moment. It asserted individual freedom from cultural and moral taboos, and it fostered in art an inversion of the aesthetic which had previously demanded classic decorum, simplicity, order, and unity. It sought in art and life the ideal symbolized by Dionysus, the god of wine and fertility, an ideal related to both love and intoxication, either of which promises momentary ecstasy as its ultimate reward.

That it was not real decadence, that it was the product of impetuosity and revolt rather than of age and maturity, that its presence in the nation-at-large was never secure, all these observations are true, but they are also misleading. The decade that reflected post-war bohemia in its fads and philosophy was seldom aware that it was only a reflection. In its excess, in its veneer of release, in its inability to dispense with the conscience even while ignoring it, the era proved its willful self-deception. But in its more subtle modulations it

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gave the nation a new maturity and self-realization that would not have developed without the impetus of revolt and experiment. On the surface the movement was one of running away; lying deeper in the headlong race was the motion of running toward.

Bohemianism (although characteristically it was employed in its adjective form) was the term used; perhaps decadence lacked the essential ring of modernity. "One moment of real life is worth a ton of platitudes (like the one I've just written)," was James Huneker's expression of it.¹ Walter Lippmann puzzled over its impact on social philosophy: "The attempt to measure the degree in which impulse is to be permitted to express itself is obviously full of difficulties. . . . Morality, if it is not fixed by custom and authority, becomes a mere matter of taste determined by the idiosyncrasies of the moralist."² Some, like Ernest Boyd in an article published in Mencken's and Nathan's first issue of the American Mercury, ridiculed with a direct satire the pose, fraud, insufficiency, and unconscious hypocrisy of the aesthete of the early Twenties.³

¹Huneker to Benjamin de Casseres, May 7, 1908, Letters of James Gibbons Huneker, ed. Josephine Huneker (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922), p. 86.

²Walter Lippmann, A Preface to Morals, p. 166.

³Ernest Boyd, "Aesthete: Model 1924," American Mercury, I (Jan., 1924), 51-56.

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Bonemianism (although characteristically it was employed in the adjective form) was the term used; perhaps because it lacked the essential ring of modernity. "One moment of real life is worth a ton of platitudes" (like the one I've just written), "was James Bonemer's expression of it." ¹ Walter Lippmann puzzled over its impact on social philosophy: "The attempt to measure the degree in which impulse is to be permitted to express itself is obviously full of difficulties. . . . Morality, if it is not fixed by custom and authority, becomes a mere matter of taste determined by the idiosyncrasies of the individual." ² Some, like Ernest Boyd in an article published in Bonemer's and Nathan's first issue of the American Mercury, ridiculed with a direct satire the pose, trend, inconsistency, and unconscious hypocrisy of the aesthetes of the early twenties. ³

¹ Bonemer to Benjamin de Casseres, May 7, 1908, Letters of James Gibson Bonemer, ed. Josephine Bonemer (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922), p. 65.

² Walter Lippmann, A Preface to Morals, p. 102.

³ Ernest Boyd, "Aesthetes: Model 1921," American Mercury, I (Jan., 1921), 21-22.

Van Vechten maintained a precarious balance.

Bohemian himself by inclination and association, he wrote of people devoted to the uninhibited moment, but his affection for them did not prevent his exposure of their follies. Instead it made the amusing exposition of those follies the basis of his books. Peter Whiffle exhausted the possibilities of aesthetic realization and found himself, instead. The sophisticated characters of The Blind Bow-Boy and Firecrackers outdid each other in their attempts to banish boredom through perverse and novel pleasures, but over them reigned the detached super-sophisticate, Campaspe, whose more stable pleasure came not from her own participation, but from the detached observation of the others. "It was only. . . those who expected to find amusement in themselves who wandered about disconsolate and bored. Amusement was to be derived from watching others, when one permitted them to be entirely themselves."¹

Except for Parties, and, to a lesser extent its preceding novels, Nigger Heaven and Spider Boy, the line separating Van Vechten from the excesses of his characters is a tenuous one. Campaspe displays an awareness above that of her companions, but she is disturbingly

¹The Blind Bow-Boy, p. 115.

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Except for Peter, and, to a lesser extent the preceding novels, Wister Haven and Golden Boy, the line separating Van Vechten from the excesses of his characters is a tenuous one. Perhaps despite an awareness above that of her companions, but she is disturbingly

¹The Blind Bow-Boy, p. 115.

unaffected and supreme in her lack of conscience. Her ego is admissable, but it is undisciplined by any super-ego. At best, it observes with aloofness what it chooses to call "comportment" rather than evoke the morality of the term "deportment." The reader is shocked not so much by the characters' immorality as he is by the author's unmorality. It was somehow insufficient to accept as the whole man Mabel Dodge's explanation that, "With him amusing things were essential things; whimsicality was the note they must sound to have significance."¹ With the last three novels, however, the balance was reaffirmed. Still picturing the excesses of bohemianism, Nigger Heaven made them the tools of a tragedy. Spider Boy applied its own antic disposition to the outlandish West Coast imitation of the real thing. Parties, at the end of the era, described the clientele of the Wishbone, the speakeasy in which its harried, abandoned sophisticates clustered almost in mutual protection from reality, as cosmopolitan. "Perhaps bohemian--if one may revive a worn out epithet that once meant a great deal--" it added, "would be a more exact word."²

¹Movers and Shakers, p. 16.

²Parties, p. 29.

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¹ Mothers and Daughters, p. 16.

² Parties, p. 29.

American Taste in Personal Living

Public taste in the Twenties worshipped at four altars: sophistication, popularity, modernity, and expediency. The first of these promised the social commodity known as "class," and put a premium on style and quality. The second provided safety in numbers and allowed the mass of America to maintain its respectability without appearing dated. The third made it necessary to keep ahead of the Joneses, and led to the succession of fads that kept the decade hopping from one interest to another. The fourth, in addition to reflecting the national inclination toward what was easy, was a question of financial and geographical availability, answered in full by the business skill of mass merchandising, distribution, and retail marketing.

Evidence of the popular move towards sophistication, towards "class," is found in both the cultural and the commercial aspects of the Twenties. At some levels, the war on pretentiousness and frippery was being successfully waged. American taste improved steadily in the pictorial arts through the Twenties. Simplicity and functionalism made rapid headway in the fields of architecture and design. Taste in the fine arts, the "lively" arts, and the domestic arts became more thoughtful, more

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sophisticated, and more cosmopolitan. But in almost all respects, American taste was guilty of overindulgence in its blind obeisance to one or more of these four altars of worship.

While mature sophistication acclaimed The New Yorker, started in 1925 by Harold Ross, for its animation, wit, and its unyielding war on pretentiousness, real estate agents, in an attempt to add "class" to their profession, became realtors, beauty operators became beauticians, undertakers became morticians, and even clerks became salespersons. The functional simplicity of modern design gave way in the popular mind to the stark angularity of modernistic lines. The urge to be "as modern as tomorrow" let the national taste assume that whatever was new was desirable. Modernity and the overnight acclaim that it bred for so many foundationless fads led away from real sophistication. Mass production assured popularity through standardization, while mass marketing encouraged the growth and continuation of poor taste by making its wares widely available and socially necessary.

In such a society, sophistication is easily lost in its own popular counterfeit, but it is no less desirable for that. The art of living comfortably, stylishly, and contentedly in the midst of one's

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In such a society, sophistication is easily lost in its own popular counterfeits, but it is no less desirable for that. The art of living comfortably, stylishly, and contentedly in the midst of one's

accessories is sought by the many, but known only to the few. A regard and affection for these accessories reflecting pleasure in the things themselves, rather than reflecting extraneous motives for their possession, is even more rare.

To a much finer degree than anyone else writing in America during the era, Joseph Hergesheimer and Carl Van Vechten possessed this epicurean art of taste and of charming living. Hergesheimer's novels were furnished by an author who knew what he liked and why he liked it. They delighted in the texture of fine fabrics, the tints of glassware, the grace of the craftsman's art in furniture, the bouquet of rare wines, and the exotic effects of exquisite jewelry. His was the art of sensuous refinement, antique in its flavor and consistently conscious of atmospheric essence.

The décor in Van Vechten's books was more lively, more variable, more personal, and more vulnerable to imitation than Hergesheimer's, but the personal sense of atmosphere was just as evident. Individuality was its keynote, and the reflection of its owner's personality was its mark. In an early essay, impudently entitled, "In Defense of Bad Taste," he had discussed the personal aspects of interior decoration, asserting that the selection of household items and bric-a-brac should be

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The debt to Van Vechten's books was more lively, more variable, more personal, and more vulnerable to imitation than Hergesheimer's, but the personal sense of atmosphere was just as evident. Individually his was its keynote, and the reflection of its owner's personality was its mark. In an early essay, lapidarily entitled, "In Defense of Bad Taste," he had diagnosed the personal aspects of interior decoration, asserting that the selection of household items and price-tag should be

made by the individuals rather than by a professional decorator.¹ He ridiculed the prevalent methods represented by the typical American millionaire who spent a fortune for furnishings, which served in no way his personality or individuality, only to discover he didn't like them and couldn't use them. In his novels, he revealed characters through the self-expression (or the lack of it) to be found in their surroundings, in the furnishings they had chosen to live with. Peter Whiffle, of course, is the outstanding example of this; each new dedication to a way of life and a means to art in Peter's restless life is signalled by a new abode and a new set of personal appurtenances. Only his cat, Van Vechten's symbol of the philosophy which Peter gradually discovers as the goal of his quest, accompanies Peter through all his settings. Gareth Johns and Lennie Colman in The Tattooed Countess, Mary Love in Nigger Heaven, and others are revealed, in a similar fashion, through the choice of their surroundings. Even Mrs. Alonzo W. Syreno, the unimaginative pretender among the weary sophisticates of Parties, owns a house done by an English decorator which bears the stamp of "a permanently

¹The Merry-Go-Round, pp. 11-20.

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¹ The Merry-Go-Round, pp. 11-20.

uninhabited English house," and betrays her lack of both taste and imagination in its alien character.

It was inevitable that Van Vechten should reveal himself as well as his characters through this feature of his writing. His sense of rapport with objects and possessions is a part of all his work, disclosing through the catalogues of impedimenta and decorations his own taste for the exotic, the unusual, the colorful, and the sensuous.

Mabel Dodge Luhan has observed his ability to animate her surroundings through a sympathetic appreciation of them:

He entered the exquisitely ordered and prepared apartment and he enjoyed it so much that he seemed to give it a gently vibrating awareness of itself. He never realized that the lovely objects all gathered together in a perfect pattern had no life of their own nor even any borrowed life from me, and he gave them such an appreciation of the cozy living world they made. . . that there was an instant response from all those inanimate things and the place became alive for us and for all others who ever afterwards entered there.¹ He set it going on its changing round of appearances.

To the few who followed the example of his sophisticated tastes and manners as a means to self-cultivation, and as a method of achieving genuine pleasure through the personal development of artistic appreciation, Van Vechten brought the same animation as he had to Mabel Dodge.

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Mabel Dodge Farnham has observed his ability to animate her surroundings through a sympathetic appreciation of them:

He entered the exultantly ordered and prepared apartment and he enjoyed it so much that he seemed to give it a gently vibrating awareness of itself. He never realized that the lovely objects all gathered together in a perfect pattern had no life of their own nor even any borrowed life from me; and he gave them such an appreciation of the cozy living world they made. . . that there was an instant response from all those inanimate things and the place became alive for us and for all others who ever afterwards entered there. He set it going on its changing round of appearances.

To the few who followed the example of his sophisticated tastes and manners as a means to self-cultivation, and as a method of achieving genuine pleasure through the personal development of artistic appreciation, Van Vechten brought the same animation as he had to Mabel Dodge.

To the bulk of his readers, for whom he was an end product to be imitated, a curious model that one should, for some reason, pattern one's way after if sophistication was to be gained, he was another fad of the Twenties, the author to read, the thing to do, the pattern to follow, the means of keeping above (and ahead of) the next fellow--who, ironically, was employing the same vain means to the same futile end.

Novelties and Fads

Any author who indulged his whims and thrived on novelty was in tune with the Twenties. A society which immediately caught up anything novel, strange, or modern, and just as quickly dropped it for the next item in the series could accept as its own the writer who was likely to discover some new field or exciting interest with each new book. In an age of fads, Van Vechten was one of the leading faddists. He introduced new composers, the emotions of the blues, Gertrude Stein, the Harlem vogue, strange and exotic figures in literature, and the lively performers of stage entertainments. To him the novel experience was the most satisfying, although not necessarily the most lasting. "Life was perceived to be a fastidious circus, and strange conjunctions were more prized than the ordinary relationships rooted in eternity."¹

¹Ibid.

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fraternal circus, and strange conjunctions were more
prized than the ordinary relationship rooted in eternity.

In his personal life he cultivated caprice and whimsy. He was amused by exhibitionism, sometimes his own as well as others'. He turned whim into custom by having his signature on the contracts of all his books after 1920 witnessed by "someone in some way connected with the subject or the intention or the dedication of each book."¹ Thus Fania Marinoff, the actress who became Mrs. Van Vechten, served for Peter Whiffle, Hugh Walpole for The Blind Bow-Boy, Theodore Dreiser for The Tattooed Countess, H. L. Mencken for Excavations, James Branch Cabell for Firecrackers, Sinclair Lewis (for the sake of the pun) for Red, James Weldon Johnson for Nigger Heaven, Charlie Chaplin (Van Vechten traveled across the continent to indulge this whim) for Spider Boy, Texas Guinan for Parties, and Eugene O'Neill for Sacred and Profane Memories.

In joining the national passion for novelties and fads, however, his disregard for confining consistency once again enabled him to participate in the amusements at the same time as he pointed out their ridiculous features. His novels consistently satirized the aberrations and characteristics of the same public that

¹ Carl Van Vechten, "Mr. Cabell of Lichfield and Foictesme," Yale University Library Gazette, XXIII (July, 1948), 2.

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Compton, John Barlow for John Barlow, James Brown
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¹ Carl Van Veen, "Mr. Cabell of Abingdon and
Polk County," Yale University Library Gazette, XLIII
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received them so enthusiastically. The antics that endeared American society to Van Vechten, and provided the subjects for his novels, were shown to their perpetrators in the light of their pretentious foolishness, and were accepted more often than not as amusing caricatures of others. To Van Vechten this must have been the most grotesque, and therefore the most entertaining, irony of all. Much the same thing happened with Sinclair Lewis's satires of middle-class America, but there was tragic irony in the readers' reluctance to identify his characters with themselves. In Van Vechten, the situation only heightened the ironic comedy.

In Parties, he employed the phrases and pet expressions of the time to the point of fine ridicule. "There's music to that" is the inevitable comment following the inadvertent use of a song title in conversation. Just as inevitable is its tired counter-reply, "I know." Simone Fly terminates her inane remarks with the unconscious pertinence of her "Blaaa." "We're here because we're here," mimicks a character at the conclusion of the book, and Van Vechten has him add with more originality, "and we should be extremely silly not to make the worst of it." Ambrose Deacon, before he is set upon by the egomaniacs of Hollywood in Spider Boy, runs through the prescribed ritual of the times in the solitude

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originality, "and we should be extremely silly not to
make the most of it." Ambrose Bierce, before he is sat-
irized by the egomaniacs of Hollywood in Spider Boy, runs
through the prescribed ritual of the times in the solitude

of his train compartment: "He had read the current issue of the Saturday Evening Post to the last advertising page; he had considered the plight of the poor farmer; he had reflected on the subject of Calvin Coolidge; he had even wondered whether there was a God."¹

The craze for cults is lampooned in Firecrackers with the life story of Pinchon's Prophylactic Plan, conceived rather suddenly by Emmaline Pinchon, a governess at the time of inspiration. The plan was a philosophy of acrobatics which held as some of its principles, "Deep breathing while standing on the head during the simultaneous consideration of the ultimate oneness of God with human kind, the essential co-ordination of the waving left arm with the soul, and the identity of the somersault with the freedom of the will."²

The Duke of Middlebottom, asserting that "Everything that one called modern a year ago [1922] is old-fashioned [in 1923] ," gives quite a catalogue to "prove" his point. Among his items of modernity are Freud, Mary Garden, Einstein, Wyndham Lewis, Dada, glands, the Six, vers libre, radio, the Ziegfeld Follies, cubism, Sacha

¹Spider Boy, p. 17.

²Firecrackers, p. 174.

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The crass for cult is lampooned in *Firecrackers*

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¹Spider Boy, p. 17.

²Firecrackers, p. 174.

Guity, Ezra Pound, The Little Review, vorticism, Marcel Proust, The Dial, uranians, Gordon Craig, prohibition, the young intellectuals, Sherwood Anderson, normalcy, Charlie Chaplin, fireless cookers, ectoplasm, the tango, and Negro dancing!¹

Perhaps the most direct portraiture of all, and the most double-barreled because it attended to both the celebrity-idolizing public and the hypocritical elite, was Lalla Draycott, introduced in brief to the readers of Firecrackers for no other ostensible reason than to sketch an amusing type from the Twenties. She rode a black stallion in the park every morning. When it was possible and fashionable, she indulged in fox-hunting. "She attended football and baseball games, and race-meets, and played golf and tennis. She knew the names of every celebrity mentioned in the sporting pages of the newspapers. She could talk about Paavo Nurmi, Georges Carpentier, Jack Dempsey, Vincent Richards, or Epinard for an entire day without stopping. . .whereas it is doubtful if she knew whether Anatole France was President of the Swiss Republic or a member of the Irish Parliament. She went to all the prize-fights and wrestling-matches in Madison Square Garden, usually occupying

¹The Blind Bow-Boy, p. 128.

Gilby, Kate Pomeroy, the little Review, the little
 Pomeroy, the little, the little, the little, the little,
 the young intellectual, the young intellectual, the young
 Charlie Chaplin, the little, the little, the little,
 and Negro dancing!¹
 Perhaps the most famous of all, the
 the most famous of all, the most famous of all, the
 celebrity-idealizing public and the public-idealizing
 was the first of all, the first of all, the first of all,
 of the first of all, the first of all, the first of all,
 sketch an amusing type from the first of all, the first of all,
 black action in the first of all, the first of all,
 possible and fashionable, the first of all, the first of all,
 "She attended football and baseball games, and other
 meals, and played golf and tennis, she knew the names
 of every celebrity mentioned in the sporting papers of
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 George Carpentier, Jack Dempsey, Vincent Richards, or
 Edward for an entire day without stopping. . . .
 it is doubtful if she knew whether a baseball game was
 President of the Swiss Republic or a member of the Swiss
 Parliament. She went to all the prize-fights and wrestling
 ring-matches in Madison Square Garden, usually accompanied

¹The Blind Bow-Boy, p. 133.

ringside seats. She enjoyed a bowling acquaintance with Tex Rickard. No horse or dog-show ever opened without her presence. She wore mannish suits and smoked little cigars especially made for her."¹ Lalla Draycott was, in a phrase that can work two ways, no dream.

Celebrities: The Vicarious Thrill

Ulick Invern, the bohemian hero of James Huneker's 1920 novel, Painted Veils, found himself uncomfortably perched "on the jagged edge of ennui."² Much of America shared his discomfort in the ensuing ten years, and sought every imaginable way to keep from going over the edge. "Everywhere there is evidence of the search for the thrill," wrote Van Vechten in 1915, "by the masses, by individuals; revolution, fast motoring, war, feminism, Jew baiting, Alfred Casella, aeroplaning, the Russian Ballet, are sign posts which point ways to those who lack the ingenuity to invent personal thrills or at least the capacity to enjoy them."³ These were thrills one could enjoy at first hand; there were others more popular

¹Firecrackers, p. 199.

²James Huneker, Painted Veils (New York: Live-right Black and Gold Editions, 1942), p. 235.

³In the Garret, p. 134.

ringed seats. She enjoyed a bowing acquaintance with
Tex Rickard. No horse or dog-show ever opened without
her presence. She wore a small white hat and carried little
cigars especially made for her. (Lillian Russell was)
in a phrase that was with two words, no dream.

Colapinto, (1923) (1924) (1925)

Ulick Inver, the son of a poor Irishman,
1920 novel, Painted Girls, found himself in a position
personed "on the jagged edge of a world." (Kind of a
shared his discomfort in the evening and night, and
sought every imaginable way to keep himself from the
edge. "Everywhere there is evidence of the rapid
the thrill," wrote Van Veen in 1911. "For the moment,
by individuals; revolution, race, nation, war, religion,
low painting, Alfred Cassin, metaphysics, and business
ballet, are also seen which hold eyes to those and
lack the ingenuity to invent some of their own or at least
the capacity to enjoy them." These were the life one
could enjoy at first and then there came a time when

¹ Painted Girls, p. 192.

² James Huneker, Painted Girls (New York: 1924)
right Black and Gold (1923), p. 233.

³ In the Carpet, p. 134.

because less dangerous. The average citizen was satisfied by the vicarious thrill of identifying himself with the glamor, the charm, the adventure, and the success of the Celebrated Name.

The game was particularly satisfying when the public could boldly assume an affectionate equality with the object of their worship. Sixty thousand fans in Yankee Stadium didn't merely watch George Herman Ruth earn his tremendous salary by hitting a baseball four hundred feet into the streets of the Bronx; they cheered him for the opportunity he gave them to enter the game with "C'mon, Babe, hit one for me!" and then to share in the glory and exultation when he came through with the home run. A hundred twenty-five million Americans didn't adulate Charles A. Lindbergh, a young pilot who flew alone from New York to Paris; they idolized the shy "Lindy," one of their own, the kid next door who had given them the thrill of danger, who had gambled as they would have feared to gamble, but in winning had let them share the victory.

Every celebrity, whether his by-line was "I love you all," "I just did it for the wife and kids," or "I want to be alone," was a public trust, yielding dividends in reflected glory, glamor, and charm. The nation sought

because they are dangerous. The average citizen was misled by the victorious spirit of himself, which the glories, the triumph, the advantage, and the success of the celebrated name.

The game was particularly satisfying when the public could boldly assume an antagonistic position against the object of their worship. Many thousands of fans in Yankee Stadium didn't merely watch George Herman Ruth earn his tremendous salary of thirteen a season for four hundred feet into the air, but they also cheered him for the opportunity he gave them to enter the game with "O'mon, babe, hit one for me!" and then to stand in the glory and excitement when he came through with the home run. A hundred twenty-five million Americans didn't realize Charles A. Lindbergh, a young pilot who flew alone from New York to Paris, they idolized the very "Lindy," one of their own, the kid next door who had given them the thrill of adventure, who had gambled as they would have feared to gamble, and in winning had let them share the victory.

Every celebrity, whether the public was "I love you all," "I just said it for the wife and kids," or "I want to be alone," was a public figure, a public figure in reflected glory, glories, and triumph. The nation sought

to escape humdrum existence by its interest in the exciting lives of others. The names and personalities of "stars" cannot be neglected in a history of the period without losing something essential in its spirit. Worth a volume of exposition is the photograph in Geraldine Farrar's autobiography showing her embarkation on a concert tour following her Metropolitan Opera farewell performance. In it, a mob of admirers swarm around the observation car platform with pennants reading "Farrar," and a sign mounted on the rear of the platform proclaims: "None But You--Gerry-flappers."¹

The celebrities themselves upheld the mania, leading lives consistent with the demand for glamor, charm, and unpredictability. They were singular beings, most of them, whose responsibility to their public was to maintain their own independent charm and power. Like Michael Arlen's Princess Baba, they defined the universe in terms of their own accomplishments. The Princess, in one of Arlen's seasonably popular sophisticated romances, Mayfair, disagrees with the remark that we are all as God has made us. "By no means," she replies, "for some people are charming and some are not, and what does God know of charm? It is dreadful to lie awake at nights

¹Geraldine Farrar, Such Sweet Compulsion (New York: The Greystone Press, 1938), facing page 192.

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know of charm? It is dreadful to lie awake at night

¹Gertrude Lawrence, *Such Sweet Company* (New York: The Greyhound Press, 1935), facing page 132.

thinking that God lacks charm. Yet the word is never so much as mentioned in the Bible."¹ It was a word the Twenties knew, and it was an inevitable word in any discussion of Carl Van Vechten's books.

He gave his readers Mary Garden and Geraldine Farrar and Ronald Firbank and Elinor Wylie and Edith Dale and Peter Whiffle and Zimbule O'Grady and Campaspe Lorillard and Ella Nattatorrini and Gunnar O'Grady and a host of others, real, half-real, and imaginary--including Carl Van Vechten. Even Tallulah Bankhead, "an animated young blonde," has a walk-on in Parties.²

Van Vechten's glamor, however, was located in New York and Paris. America was a kind of nostalgic dream, pleasant enough at a distance but deadly to meet face to face, lying vaguely between the cosmopolitan activity of New York and its pretentious imitation on the West Coast. When he approached Hollywood, he changed his tone from sophisticated comedy to burlesque.³ His

¹Michael Arlen, Mayfair (New York: George H. Doran, 1925), p. 26.

²Parties, p. 128.

³Geraldine Farrar and Mary Garden both turned to Hollywood, the former as early as 1915 and the latter screening Thais and one other film somewhat later. Neither, interestingly, was very successful in her movie appearances.

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 opinion of Carl Van Vechten's novel.

He gave his readers a very curious and detailed
 further and detailed picture of the life and habits of
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 of others, real, half-real, and imaginary--including
 Carl Van Vechten, even William Faulkner, an admirer
 young blonde, "has a well-to-do family."

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jibes at the movies began in The Blind Bow-Boy with Campaspe's advice to Harold Prewett to try the movies because he is such a poor actor: "You have a good appearance, and if you were a good actor you couldn't get into the pictures."¹ Practically all of Chapter Twelve in the same novel is satire--flimsy and weak for Van Vechten--of the movies. Spider Boy is, of course, his most amusing and devastating burlesque of Hollywood art and celebrity, and the same tone of farce runs through Parties in the presence of a movie queen named Midnight Blue.

He catches the Twenties' need for excitement in his novels much more surely than he does the symptoms displayed in celebrity-worship and false glamor, however. His books are a running battle with the ennui that Ulick Invern and the Twenties dreaded. They left a record of the whole feverish cycle that defied a reckoning in its pursuit of the momentary thrill. The frivolous youth and gay abandon of Peter Whiffle and The Blind Bow-Boy were products of the rising fever, anticipating rather than reporting the crest. They were self-contained, certain of their power over the inevitable shadows of existence. They announced that life could be lived forever on the plateaus of pleasure; like Frances Alda,

¹The Blind Bow-Boy, p. 221.

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 forever on the plateau of pleasure; like Frances Albee,

¹The Blind Bow-Boy, p. 221.

who wrote it bluntly into her autobiography, they asserted, "I refuse to know bores. My world is active and amusing; sometimes exciting; never dull."¹ As early as Firecrackers, though, Van Vechten touched the end of the dream that Parties made manifest, when Paul Moody was discovered at the outset musing disconsolately over his boredom: "That is the whole trouble with us damned, restless spirits, there are no new overmastering emotions. . . . There is nothing new to think, or to feel, or to do. Even unhappiness has become a routine tremor."²

Morals, Marriage, and the Family

The moral "freedom" of the jazz age has been much discussed and perhaps too often maligned. It is simple to condemn the irresponsible liberties of an era which indulged its appetite for sensation, without considering the value of the moral revolution that made such indulgence possible. Hand in hand with the social revolution which followed World War I came a new faith in the objective revelations of science. With scientific immunity, inquiry could be made into areas of social existence which had previously been forbidden territory.

¹ Frances Alda, Men, Women and Tenors (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1937), p. 4.

² Firecrackers, p. 3.

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¹ Frances Alda, Men, Women and Terrors (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1937), p. 4.

² Freeborders, p. 5.

The science of psychology, with Dr. Freud's theories and methods guiding the popular mind, explored the natural impulses within the dynamics of the self, and attempted to discover patterns of social behavior that were inherent in the individual, heedless of those artificially imposed by folk custom and tradition except as they indicated whatever was basic and natural. The possibilities of self-knowledge and emotional maturity had never been so close at hand before. The difficulties of the age which first tasted the benefits of this release from taboo and superstition came from society's acceptance of the methods as an end rather than a means. The lag between the discoveries of science and the formation of a social philosophy which can assure their benefits to society has been the problem of more than one decade in our century. Morally, the Twenties were the victims of this circumstance. That they ignored the lag so blithely is their greatest sin.

To begin with, they attempted to re-establish a taboo in order to bring about a balance. The noble experiment of Prohibition only inspired further rebellion in a society encouraged to escape arbitrary restriction.

Sex, the most intriguing area from which the "No Trespassing" sign had been removed, became a public

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thoroughfare, a short-cut with the hazards of the road eliminated and the beauty of the landscape obscured by sensational billboards. By 1929, Joseph Wood Krutch could lament, "Love is becoming gradually so accessible, so unmysterious, and so free that its value is trivial."¹ A year later, D. H. Lawrence, himself a serious dealer in Freudian art, attacked the illegitimate "sex-free" "emancipated bohemians." "The dirty little secret is no secret to him or her. . . . They have apparently killed the dirty little secret, but somehow they have killed everything else too. . . . Hence the terrible dreariness and depression of modern Bohemia, and the inward dreariness and emptiness of so many young people today."²

As a consequence, marriage and the American family went through a period of severe trial. The group, in this popular philosophy, was placed second to the individual. Responsibility was centered in the ego and its urges. Sentiment could easily be ignored momentarily and betrayed permanently in the process. Pulled apart at the same time by the individual entertainment available

¹Joseph Wood Krutch, The Modern Temper, p. 101.

²D. H. Lawrence, "Pornography and Obscenity," Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D. H. Lawrence, p. 182.

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² D. H. Lawrence, "Pornography and Obscenity," Phoenix: The Testimonies of D. H. Lawrence, p. 112.

elsewhere for the taste of each member of the family and the rising independence of women in default of the traditional double standard, the home was subject to strains which threatened even this most secure of social units.

Van Vechten's fiction reflects each of these problems with his customary give-and-take ambivalence. He reserved comment on Prohibition, virtually ignoring both its motives and its manifestations, as, indeed, most of America had, until Parties. There it was offered as an integral part of the ironic tragedy of the whole decade. American Prohibition was sketched for an astonished German noblewoman who immediately yearned to witness it in action: "Other nations controlled the output of intoxicating liquors, deriving much revenue therefrom, and some nations, notably England, stipulated hours for drinking, but as drinking was prohibited in America, the government derived no benefit from the extraordinary amount of gins, wines, and whiskey consumed and one could drink wherever and whatever and whenever one pleased."¹ For the characters crowded in upon themselves in their attempt to escape, liquor was their only means. The escape in Parties was persistent and insistent. After the first sober interlude in eighty pages, David Westlake

¹Parties, p. 17.

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For the characters crowded in upon themselves in their
attempt to escape, fiction was their only means. The
escape in Parties was persistent and unrelenting. After
the first sober interlude in thirty pages, the

admits to his wife, "We're shattered, Rilda. What we need is a drink. It's pretty near lunch time. We've had too much sober sleep. We're not used to it. The sun's too bright."¹ When David temporarily forsakes drink in a vain attempt to stop the merry-go-round of their existence, he asks the questions that haunted a whole society in uneasy transition: "Have I stopped drinking so that I may capture some feeling out of thought, or shall I drink again to capture thought out of feeling? How exactly should I behave as a sober person?"²

In matters of sex, Van Vechten's novels were notoriously emancipated. Peter Whiffle was uninhibited, but maintained a decorous charm in what the readers of 1922 called its indiscretions. The Blind Bow-Boy, however, treated even the perversions of sex with a flip-pant intimacy that was shocking in 1923 and still seems the least palatable of his erotic trivia. The reputation of The Tattooed Countess has been celebrated by Sinclair Lewis's Gideon Planish in a fictitious episode that turns on the contemporary reception of its "improprieties."³ Firecrackers employs the peccadillos of the

¹Ibid., pp. 85-86.

²Ibid., p. 91.

³Sinclair Lewis, Gideon Planish (New York: Random House, 1943), p. 130 et. seq.

Bow-Boy to more serious purpose. Nigger Heaven and Spider Boy continue this trend, the first exploiting the author's most erotic sequences for both artistic and moral ends, and the second passing over them so lightly that entertaining innuendo carries the weight of the author's purpose. Parties, once again, is the most searching treatment of a social ill. Sex is rampant and free in this final book, but its consequences for the characters and for the reader are deeply disturbing. The frustrated lives caught in the conventions which grew out of a revolt against earlier conventions are tragically lost in a new transition. As one reviewer of the book discerned, Parties is a significant hail-and-farewell, the manner of its author familiar, but the emotion and strength behind it more powerful than it had been in any previous book; ". . . it is painful and violent and essentially moral; and because of it Van Vechten is more definitely creative than before, and the reading of his Parties is an experience, not an entertainment."¹

Van Vechten's novels are peculiarly childless. Only two children are given speaking roles in the seven

¹George Dangerfield, Bookman, LXXII (Sept., 1930), 72.

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¹George Bangertfeld, Bookman, LXXII (Sept., 1950), 75.

books, and both of them are unique. Consuelo Everest of Firecrackers is so modern and sophisticated that her mother (whom she addresses "Maman") despairs of catching up with her; in these respects, the child surpasses everyone else on the scene but Campaspe Lorillard. Regent Westlake, the other, enters the final chapter of Parties with no previous hint of his existence, to ask in eight-year-old confusion that Hamish Wilding try to keep his mother and father from drinking so much. "His point of view is pretty regular," Hamish remarks to a companion who, like the reader, hadn't even known David and Rilda had a child. "Of course they scarcely ever do see him because they hate to have him see them drunk and they almost always are."¹

Aside from these two, children are either non-existent or offstage. Campaspe and Cupid Lorillard have two boys, but they are kept at the comfortable distance of a boarding school so that their mother can escape the responsibilities and bother of having them under foot. Her marriage, appropriately, has been maintained since their birth solely as a convenience and a means of financing her extravagant whims. She has declared herself free of all encumbering affection and responsibility, and

¹Parties, p. 254.

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¹Parties, p. 254.

insists that her husband leave her alone. What he does, in turn, is no concern of hers: "I don't care in the least what you do. I should never have married you if I had planned to worry about you."¹ Even the children seem to be free of any need for parental concern or affection. Cupid is a normally solicitous father, but they prefer the remote, detached Campaspe.

This wish to lead a weightless existence free from distracting alliances is almost thematic in Van Vechten's tales. Peter Whiffle, wherein it was first discovered, even applied it to friendship, which unfortunately entailed "responsibility, that great god whose existence burdens our lives."² Only the more realistic scenes of The Tattooed Countess and Nigger Heaven present marriage and the home as anything more than a means of placing amusing or contrasting personalities in juxtaposition, and even these, along with the perpetual crisis of the Westlakes' marriage in Parties, describe tragic misunderstandings within the constraint of the family unit.

Van Vechten's personal experience seems to have only a little in common with these elements in his

¹The Blind Bow-Boy, p. 103.

²Peter Whiffle, p. 146.

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This wish to lead a weightless existence free from distracting alliances is almost thematic in Van Vechten's tales. Peter Whittle, wherein it was first discovered, even applied it to friendship, which author emphatically entitled "responsibility." That great God whose existence burdens our lives.² Only the more realistic scenes of The Tattooed Goddess and Higher Heaven present marriage and the home as anything more than a means of placing amusing or contrasting personalities in juxtaposition, and even these, along with the perpetual crisis of the Westlake's marriage in Parties, describe tragic misunderstandings within the constraint of the family unit.

Van Vechten's personal experience seems to have only a little in common with these elements in his

¹The Blind How-boy, p. 104.

²Peter Whittle, p. 146.

novels. His reminiscent essays indicate a warm affection for his sympathetic mother and a sincere admiration and respect for his father, but that is the twentieth century reflecting on the nineteenth. His own first marriage, to an early acquaintance from Cedar Rapids, terminated in divorce, but his subsequent marriage to Fania Marinoff was one of the few successful and permanent unions of their set, lasting and deepening through and beyond the turbulent Twenties.

Business: One Perceptive Glance

Business, in Calvin Coolidge's phrase the only business of the United States, was hardly in Van Vechten's range of vision. That it produced the money which could be spent by the sophisticated leisure class was sufficient. When someone spoke of tired American businessmen, Campaspe countered, "Is there such a thing as a business man in America? I suppose so. Cupid, even, does something down town. But we try to keep that sort of thing in the background. We try not to be aware of it. It is the smart thing to do nothing, or, at any rate, to appear to do nothing."¹ It was too commonplace to suit the public's desire for novelty. Whatever was familiar lacked the glamor required to command attention.

¹The Blind Bow-Boy, p. 133.

novels. His reminiscences suggest a warm affection for his sympathetic mother and a sincere admiration and respect for his father, but that is the twelfth century reflecting on the nineteenth. His own first marriage, to an early acquaintance from Oxford, resulted in a divorce, but his subsequent marriage to Emily, who was one of the few successful and persistent artists of their set, lasting and deepening through and beyond the turbulent Twenties.

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But when Paul Moody, to whom business was totally unfamiliar, went to work for a brokerage firm to escape the boredom of his desuetude in Firecrackers, he discovered the same sense of thrill and excitement there that he had sought in the company of Campaspe's depraved derelicts. He was amazed to find that they were having an extraordinarily good time.

To be sure, they dashed nimbly after the dollar, but even that part of the game resembled gambling or fox-hunting. It was an adventure replete with thrills, false trials, happy discoveries, comic coincidences. There was so much, indeed, of sportsman's luck in everything that went on there that Wall Street was prone to impress him as a kind of glorified Monte Carlo, the Circassian walnut cabinets in each office, stored with liquors and tobacco, supplying the place of the bar, while the Stock Exchange made an excellent substitute for the *salle de jeu*.¹

It was Van Vechten's only glimpse of the American capitalistic business man, but it managed to see more than met the eye. It was glib and it was superficial, but like so many of Van Vechten's amused observations, it caught an essential spirit and an essential weakness of the era.

Race Relations: A Problem

and No Problem

Before the First World War racial hostility had

¹Firecrackers, p. 109.

But when Paul Moody, the man who had been
 familiar, went to work for the company, he discovered
 the records of his business in the records, he discovered
 the same names of Smith and Johnson, those who had
 sought in the company of the company, he discovered
 he was asked to find the man who had been an
 ordinarily good man.

To be sure, they were not the same man, but
 but even so, it was an interesting thing to find
 fox-hunting. It was an interesting thing to find
 Smith, John, and Johnson, those who had been an
 ordinary good man. There was no doubt, indeed, of a
 man's life in every way that was not a little
 well known and more so, indeed, as a little
 glorified man, John, the man who had been an
 man in each office, even so, indeed, as a little
 and living the life of the man, who was a
 Executive made an excellent man for the sake
 of the.

It was Van Vleet's only glimpse of the man, but
 Catholic business man, but it was a good one.
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 like so many of Van Vleet's business observations, it
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Handwritten: The man
 and the man
 before the first war, the man who had been an

been decreasing in the United States under the influence of agencies for co-operation and understanding. The work of Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee was the most important pre-war contribution. The Southern Sociological Congress had been active since 1912. The University Commission on the Southern Race Problem, organized by James H. Dillard, studied the Negro's difficulties. The college Y.M.C.A. served as an outlet for the work of Dr. Willis D. Weatherford, President of Southern College. Recognition for the Negro had never been so promising. During the war and its aftermath, however, the nation was plunged into the most difficult period in race relationship since the Reconstruction. Violence marked the return of the Ku Klux Klan, assisted in its revival by the widely viewed movie The Birth of a Nation, which featured scenes of Negro terrorism in the Civil War South.

In addition, the steady migration of the Negro had spread the responsibility for his welfare and treatment. The race was growing and expanding, and the problem became less and less one of sectionalism. Dwight Dumond records that between 1910 and 1920, "Negro urban population increased 397,000 in the South, while the rural population decreased 233,000. It increased 479,000 in the North during the same period. The movement was

been decreasing in the United States under the influence of agencies for co-operation and understanding. The work of Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee was the most important pre-war contribution. The Southern Sociological Congress had been active since 1912. The University Commission on the Southern Race Problem, organized by James H. Dillard, assisted the Negro's difficulties. The college Y.M.C.A. served as an outlet for the work of Dr. Willis D. Weatherford, President of Southern College. Recognition for the Negro had never been so promising. During the war and its aftermath, however, the nation was plunged into the most difficult period in race relationship since the Reconstruction. Violence marked the return of the Ku Klux Klan, assisted in its revival by the widely viewed movie The Birth of a Nation, which portrayed scenes of Negro terrorism in the Civil War South. In addition, the steady migration of the Negro had spread the responsibility for his welfare and treatment. The race was growing and expanding, and the problem became less and less one of sectionalism. Dismantling records that between 1910 and 1920, "Negro women population increased 397,000 in the South, while the rural population decreased 255,000. It increased 479,000 in the North during the same period. The movement was

both northward and to industrial centers."¹ In terms of population, in terms of geography, in terms of economic necessity, in terms of social preference, and in terms of the growing spirit of the American Negro, this was symbolized for the period by one word: Harlem.

It was from Harlem that the Negro renaissance of the Twenties came, from the forces working within for expression, and also from those aware of the accomplishment of the Negro calling its merit to the attention of the rest of America. The Negro magazines Opportunity and Crisis (the organ of the N.A.A.C.P.) encouraged and published the work of talented Negroes, giving many of them their first chance at publication. But this was intramural recognition. Encouraged as it was by the prize competitions offered through the generosity of Amy and Joel Spingarn, it still was ingrown achievement stifled at the color line. What was needed, and what Carl Van Vechten provided with Nigger Heaven and the introduction-at-large of Harlem to America, was an awareness beyond Harlem of its intellect, its art, its spirit, and its talented individuals. In an age which celebrated the colorful individual, an acquaintance with

¹Dwight L. Dumond, America in Our Time (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1947), p. 27.

both northward and to the southward. In terms of population, in terms of geography, in terms of economic necessity, in terms of social progress, and in terms of the growing spirit of the American Negro, there was symbolized for the period by one word: emancipation. It was from within that the Negro Renaissance of the Twenties came, from the Negroes working within for expression, and also from those waves of the social movement of the Negro calling for attention to the rest of America. The Negro Renaissance opportunity and Crisis (the organ of the A.A.P.P.) encouraged and published the work of talented Negroes, giving many of them their first chance at publication. But this was instrumental recognition, encouraged as it was by the prize competitions offered through the generosity of many and Joel Spingarn. It still was important achievement, attested at the color line. What was needed, and what Carl Van Vechten provided with Nigger Heaven and the introduction-at-large of Harlem to America, was an awareness beyond Harlem of its intellect, its art, its spirit, and its talented individuals. In an age which celebrated the colorful individual, an acquaintance with

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one accomplished Negro meant more for racial relations than the remote work of any devoted committee. Even today, it is the Negro who has won the respect and the affection of the American public who best serves the acceptance of his race. And today Van Vechten is still introducing Negro personalities as individuals, as artists, as people worthy of artistic familiarity and perpetuation, although he uses his camera now where his pen has served in the past.

America first found out about the struggle, the strata, and the sincerity of Harlem in Nigger Heaven; sensation it had already anticipated there. Once again but with far more reaching effect than ever before, a Van Vechten book reflected American society while it commented upon it. The novel was sensational enough to arouse controversy and extend its audience, but it was serious and purposeful enough to bring about an awareness of cultivated activity and blighted opportunity in Harlem. It stimulated the vogue of visiting Harlem for the rest of New York's society, a fad that brought white and black together--not always amicably, but at least together where they could see for themselves.

Van Vechten reversed the technique by bringing Harlem to New York in his celebrated parties of the Twenties. He saw no reason to distinguish color in

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Van Vechten reversed the technique by bringing Harlem to New York in his celebrated parties of the Twenties. He saw no reason to distinguish color in

writing invitations, and all his varied guests benefited from this idiosyncrasy. Langston Hughes has listed a number of New York whites who had Negro guests, but adds, ". . . only Carl Van Vechten's parties were so Negro that they were reported as a matter of course in the colored society columns."¹ These parties often provided the amusement of strange assortments that always pleased Van Vechten, as well as bringing Negro and white to a point of intimate appreciation. Hughes tells of one party at which Bessie Smith sang the blues. "And when she finished, Margarita D'Alvarez of the Metropolitan Opera arose and sang an aria. Bessie Smith did not know D'Alvarez, but, liking her voice, she went up to her when she had ceased and cried: 'Don't let nobody tell you you can't sing!'"²

In a way, seeking recognition for the Negro has been a profession for Van Vechten.³ In the Twenties, particularly, when intolerance was violent and widespread, it was a sincere dedication to principle and belief that

¹Langston Hughes, The Big Sea, p. 251.

²Ibid. Hughes has confused his singers. This was Marguerite, not Margarita D'Alvarez. The famous Peruvian contralto never sang at the Metropolitan.

³Van Vechten's early vision of a Negro Theatre was largely realized in Theatre Arts for Aug., 1942, the entire copy of which was given to "The Negro in the American Theatre," with many of Van Vechten's photographs serving as illustrations.

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 which people came to the club. "And when the friends
 Margarita B. Alvarez of the Metropolitan Opera House
 sang an aria. People came to see B. Alvarez, but
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¹Langston Hughes, *The Negro Artist and the Racial Problem*, 1925.
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attacked and eventually denied the color line. But if it has been anything of a profession, it has succeeded because of its total lack of any pose suggesting professional humanitarianism. It is not the work of "do-goodism," but of Peter Whiffle's "do what you have to do." Consistently, it has afforded him more pleasures than it has difficulties. He is the intimate friend of many Negroes, but it would be more exact to say merely that he is the intimate of many. He has expressed it better in his remark to George Schuyler, "'I'd like it to be--well, like my house. Colored people come in and out, play an important role in my life--but there is no problem. Just people.'"¹ Schuyler is the Negro writer and friend who wrote without a shade of misgiving that "Carl Van Vechten. . . has done more than any single person in this country to create the atmosphere of acceptance of the Negro."²

Langston Hughes has said the same thing without the warranted but ill-fitting tone of proclamation:

He never talks grandiloquently about democracy or Americanism. Nor makes a fetish of those qualities. But he lives them with sincerity and humor.

¹George S. Schuyler, "The Van Vechten Revolution," reprinted from Phylon (Fourth Quarter, 1950), p. 8.

²Ibid., p. 1.

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Perhaps that ¹is why his parties were reported in the Harlem press.

Van Vechten's New York

Van Vechten's affection for Harlem and his intimacy with its environment, however significant it came to be, was only one facet of his regard for, and curiosity about, New York City. To James Huneker's *Mona Milton* in 1920, it was "this salty, chill and cruel city; a Venice of receded seas, a spun-steel Venice, sans hope, sans faith, sans vision."² To Sherwood Anderson it had something of the same counterfeit cosmopolitanism. In his *Memoirs*, he approached it as a metropolitan cynosure, a citadel constructed of the cosmopolitan wish, by beginning his chapter on "New York in the '20's", "O Mecca, O dream of youth, O Athens, Ohio, O Rome, O Springfield, Illinois."³ To Van Vechten it was all this and more, enough to convince him that, "I shall never be able to do New York justice: I love her too much and I am too inconstant to any one part of her."⁴ This concluded

¹Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea*, p. 255.

²Huneker, *Painted Veils*, p. 217.

³Sherwood Anderson, *Sherwood Anderson's Memoirs* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1942), p. 328.

⁴*In the Garret*, p. 270.

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Van Vechten's New York

Van Vechten's affection for Harlem and his intimacy with its inhabitants, however significant it came to be, was only one aspect of his regard for, and enthusiasm about, New York City. In James Huneker's *Paris in 1920*, it is this aspect, chill and cruel after a Venice of rounded seas, a semi-still Venice, some hope, some faith, some vision.² To Sherwood Anderson it had something of the same sentimental cosmopolitanism. In his *Memories*, he approached it as a metropolitan atmosphere, a distasteful contrast of the cosmopolitan with, by beginning his chapter on "New York in the '20's," "O Moscow, O dream of youth, O Athens, Ohio, O Rome, O Springfield, Illinois."³ To Van Vechten it was all this and more, enough to convince him that, "I shall never be able to do New York justice: I love her too much and I am too inconsistent to any one part of her."⁴ This conclusion

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³ Sherwood Anderson, *Sherwood Anderson's Memoirs* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1928), p. 250.

⁴ In the *Harper*, p. 210.

eight pages of colorful awe and approval in the 1919 essay that summed up New York as "a subtle, banal, charming, vulgar, adorable city which has seen more civilizations in fifty years than Rome in the whole of her career, a palimpsest of human impressions, a seething furnace of every passion, every desire, a congeries of every race, every creed, stratum after stratum of new birth growing from the old."¹

As the focal point of glamor, sophistication, celebrity, and variety (the movies and the ubiquitous radio wave were yet to share its position), New York was an epitome of the American social personality in the Twenties. Van Vechten was a kind of first citizen of its realm, absorbing the tremendous contrasts, cataloguing its infinite variety, and taking into his own personality as its indefatigable student and observer the metropolitan air it bred and breathed. New York City was one of the most remarkable characters in his books, sometimes separate as a physical entity, more often present as a state of mind and spirit. It was, in many particulars, both the model and the picture, for the city itself often imitated Van Vechten's conception of it. Alice B. Toklas observed this in a recent letter to Van Vechten (1951)

¹Ibid., p. 267.

eight pages of colorful and somewhat limited illustrations that seemed to have been put in by a committee of fifty years ago. In the whole of the history of painting of human figures, a series of every passion, every desire, a collection of every type, every organ, almost every human function, from the old.

As the fourth point of interest, civilization, celebrity, and variety. The movies and the radio wave were yet to share its position. Now, it was an epitome of the American social consciousness in the Twenties. Van Vechten was a kind of first class of its realm, absorbing the tremendous complexity, containing its infinite variety, and taking into its own hands as its intellectual standard and criterion the intellectual air of the time and era. New York City was one of the most remarkable characters in the world, a mixture of rate as a physical entity, more often given as a state of mind and spirit. It was, in many particular, both the model and the mirror. For the city itself often imitated Van Vechten's conception of it. It was, in fact, observed that in a recent letter to Van Vechten (1921).

in which she wrote of "you and Avery [Hopwood] as creators of modern New York. You brought it up to date and then with genius pushed it way into the future, so that whatever it may be today is due to the direction and color you gave it."¹ Others have written of the portraiture of New York in his books. H. B. Fuller, in his review of Firecrackers, concluded: "Mr. Van Vechten will doubtless leave any metropolitan epic to other pens, but his own seems equal to turning the peculiar lyrics that the 'time' and 'place'--to borrow the language of the playbill--alike call for."² In praise of Van Vechten's second novel, Ernest Boyd wrote, ". . .one turns from 'The Blind Bow-Boy' with as definite an impression of New York in 1922 as one gets of Paris under the Second Empire from the endless tomes of the Rougon Macquart series."³

When Van Vechten left New York, he took it with him. Emily Clark pictures him at a country estate one summer, "sitting, detached and metropolitan, on the grass."⁴ "Every time I leave New York I regret it,"

¹Carl Van Vechten to Edward Lueders, Dec. 3, 1951.

²H. B. Fuller, Saturday Review of Literature, II (Aug. 15, 1925), 39.

³Ernest Boyd, "Van Vechten's New York," The Nation, CXVII (Sept. 5, 1923), 244.

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he told her. "'Probably from now on pilgrims will be obliged to come to me.' This is spoken in no spirit of arrogance, only one of decision after recollection and experience."¹

There has been a bond of mutual service and appreciation between Van Vechten and his city. It has given him the variety, the amusement, the art, the personalities and the milieu that his existence demands, and he has bestowed upon it these same things in return. While it has entertained him and maintained his spirit and belief in life, he has returned the vital service by contributing to its entertainment, its spirit, and its life, giving as a practical humanitarian some of the service he had received from its humanity.² In the Twenties, particularly, he was a kind of composite voice

¹Ibid., p. 137.

²His voluntary service with the Stage Door Canteen during World War II is a notable instance. The mimeographed organ of that admirable agency reported, "Carl Van Vechten does a wonderful job as head of the personnel who greet our guests, finds partners for the gals, and in addition turns up with top entertainment from out of his left sleeve. . . . Mr. Van V. is perhaps one of the Canteen's star workers for he has never missed his two Captain of Host's shifts per week since the Canteen opened over three years ago, nor has he missed a Sunday at the Roosevelt, from which he goes to his stint at the Merchant Seaman's Club!" Emeline Roche in Canteen News, II (May 10, 1945), for the staff of American Theatre Wing Stage Door Canteen, p. 5.

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for New York, chronicling simultaneously what it was, what it wished to be, and what it might become.

Parties Symbolize an Era

The one-word title of Van Vechten's last novel symbolized perhaps the most typical manifestation of the Twenties' demand for diversion. Parties gave society personal and vital occasions for escape, occasions through which the moment could be filled with the amusement, the excitement, the tension and the challenge of personalities at close quarters. To many, time and life were measured in terms of these spirited entertainments; time spent not at a party was time spent in impatient anticipation of one. What Parties recorded in 1930 was the violent anachronism of this habitual escape at a time when escape was no longer possible. The bewilderment and disenchantment of the party-goers at the end of the decade is the undertone of tragedy that is heard like an insistent pedal point beneath the hectic flux of their parties. It is very much the same stark disappointment and shock that meets a person who has escaped in the artificial darkness of a matinee to the high life of the stage or screen, when he steps out of the theater into the glaring reality of daylight and the ant-like scramble of the city street. But while

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the anti-like scramble of the city street. But while

the performance went on inside, it was quite a show.

Van Vechten, who directed and attended more than his share of these affairs has written reflectively of them in a recent article:

The Twenties were famous for parties; everybody both gave and went to them; there was always plenty to eat and drink, lots of talk and certainly a good deal of lewd behavior. Bob Chanler [sic], artist and inspirer of the classical phrase, "Who's loony now?" lived next door to us on Nineteenth Street in a house where he held his celebrated entertainments, one of which a well-known actress hit off in the phrase, "I went there in the evening a young girl and came away in the early morning an old woman." Although Bob occupied an entire house, he gave his parties on the top floor, adjacent to our sixth floor apartment next door. Reasonably, I got in the habit of accepting his invitations. Occasionally there were fights. In these more circumspect days, when food and liquor are too expensive to serve lightly, it is difficult to conceive the impact of these drunken revels in the Twenties.¹

Van Vechten's own parties rivalled those of Chandler, perhaps surpassing them in the host's selection of his casts. Many guests have written of his affairs and all recall them with affection as well as amazement. Robert Morss Lovett has said that his student and friend brought him some of the "richest experiences" in his life. His reference was partly to reading experiences shared, but it emphasized meeting Elinor Wylie and being introduced to much of Van Vechten's cosmopolitan

¹"How I Remember Joseph Hergesheimer," Yale University Library Gazette, XXII (Jan., 1948), 88-89.

the performance went on inside, it was quite a show.

Van Vechten, who directed and attended more than his share of these affairs has written reflectively of them in a recent article:

The Twenties were famous for parties; everybody both gave and went to them; there was always plenty to eat and drink, lots of talk and certainly a good deal of loud behavior. Bob Chandler [sic], artist and inspirer of the classical phrase, "Who's loony now?" lived next door to us on Winton Street in a house where he held his celebrated entertainments, one of which a well-known actress hit off in the phrase, "I went there in the evening a young girl and came away in the early morning an old woman." Although Bob occupied an entire house, he gave his parties on the top floor, adjacent to our sixth floor apartment next door. Reasonably, I got in the habit of accepting his invitations. Occasionally there were fights. In these more circumstantial days, when food and liquor are too expensive to serve lightly, it is difficult to conceive the impact of these drunken revels in the Twenties.

Van Vechten's own parties rivaled those of Chandler, perhaps surpassing them in the host's selection of his guests. Many guests have written of his affairs and all recall them with affection as well as amazement. Robert Moras Lovett has said that his student and friend brought him some of the "richest experiences" in his life. His reference was partly to reading experiences shared, but it emphasized meeting Elmer Willis and being introduced to much of Van Vechten's cosmopolitan

society.¹ Nancy Hoyt, sister of Miss Wylie, wrote of her 1923 experience, "Bill [Benét] and Elinor took me to friends' like Carl Van Vechten's, where there were people like Carl and Fania, and things like cats and pictures and books and drinks and cigarettes of such superb quality and elegance. . . ."²

But these were earlier glimpses before the cultivated salon had become an antic saloon. Later, the gatherings took on speed and dropped any remaining ballast of reserve. Burton Rascoe's report of Van Vechten parties in the Savoy in London, ". . . in which, it was said, Van Vechten took several floors of the hotel, stocked them with liquors and vintage wines, and held open house for days and nights," although erroneous and with no foundation in fact, is indication of the pace.³ The reader of Parties recalls David Westlake's personal fog in the London sequences. Langston Hughes remembers "a gossip party, where every body was at liberty to go

¹Robert Morss Lovett, All Our Years, pp. 201-202.

²Nancy Hoyt, Elinor Wylie (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1935), p. 76.

³We Were Interrupted, pp. 233-234. Of this report Van Vechten has written me: "Rascoe's statements are frequently apocryphal. I never lived at the Savoy and never gave a party there." Carl Van Vechten to Edward Lueders, Sept. 20, 1950.

around the room repeating the worst things they could make up or recall about each other to their friends on opposite sides of the room--who were sure to go right over and tell them all about it."¹ Hughes adds a picture of the host at these frivolous occasions: "Carl Van Vechten moved about filling glasses and playing host with the greatest of zest at his parties, while his tiny wife, Pania Marinoff, looking always very pretty and very gay, when the evening grew late would sometimes take Mr. Van Vechten severely to task for his drinking--before bidding the remaining guests good night and retiring to her bed."² In a letter to Emily Clark, Van Vechten reported gleefully one of the most memorable accounts of his parties. Written on shipboard, it stated, "I am occupying part of the royal suite on the Mauretania and my going-away party was sensational. There was lots of champagne and I am sure the personnel of the ship must have decided that Booker T. Washington was sailing. Nora Holt sang 'My Daddy Rocks Me' in the last moments."³

¹Langston Hughes, The Big Sea, p. 253.

²Ibid., p. 254.

³Emily Clark, Innocence Abroad, p. 140.

around the room representing the worst things that could
 make up on itself, except when they were in the
 opposite side of the room--and were some of the
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 sure of the most at these frivolous occasions. "That"
 Van Veenster moved about filling glasses and passing
 with the greatest of ease as he passed, with his
 wife, Fania Marikoff, looking always very pretty and
 very gay, when the evening was over, and the
 take Mr. Van Veenster severely to task for his behavior--
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 retiring to her bed. In a letter to Emily Clark, Van
 Veenster reported gleefully one of the most romantic
 accounts of his marriage. Written to Emily Clark, Van
 stated, "I am completely sure of the royal family on the
 Marikoff and my going-away party was sensational."
 There was lots of champagne and wine and the
 of the ship must have decided that it was a
 was sailing. Notes told that my father was in the
 last moments."

¹London Times, the 21st, p. 253.
²Id., p. 254.
³Emily Clark, Memories, p. 140.

This last event catches the flavor of both of the capitalized adjectives in what Van Vechten refers to as "the Splendid Drunken Twenties, the speakeasy era when ladies wore the ugly hip-waisted, short dresses."¹ For what was significant and unique beyond the hilarity, the freedom, and the naughtiness of these episodes, was an attractive gregariousness and congeniality. In Van Vechten's parties this was marked by the strange casts that brought together characters, personalities, talents, and races, all equalized and brilliantly highlighted in the cordiality and the confinement of an apartment, an evening, and an appreciative host. This was the quality that makes his entertainments memorable and fabulous rather than ephemeral and merely fabled. This is the individual note that makes the most lasting and vivid of all recollections Emily Clark's memory of a "June evening in Carl's apartment."

...with George Gershwin at the piano playing and singing bits from his current musical show to a crowd of people, among whom Theodore Dreiser sat, heavy and brooding, the direct antithesis, almost a contradiction of all that Gershwin means. And Elinor Wylie sat, aloof and lovely, a contradiction and denial of all that both Dreiser and Gershwin mean. Later some woman danced, and later still Paul Robeson sang. Last of all, James Weldon Johnson recited his 'Go Down, Death.' And Carl hovered about in

¹"How I Remember Joseph Hergesheimer," Yale University Library Gazette, XXII (Jan., 1948), 87.

This last event entered the flavor of both of the capitalized objectives in what Van Vechten refers to as "the splendid drunken twenties," the speaker's era when ladies wore the ugly hip-waisted, ankle-dresses, and for what was significant and unique beyond the variety, the freedom, and the magnificence of these episodes, was an attractive femininity and congeniality. In Van Vechten's parties, this was marked by the strange casts that brought together characters, personalities, talents, and races, all equalized and brilliantly highlighted in the cordiality and the confinement of an apartment, an evening, and an appreciative host. This was the quality that makes his entertainments memorable and famous rather than ephemeral and merely faded. This is the individual note that makes the host lasting and vivid of all recollections Emily Clark's memory of a "June evening in Carl's apartment."

... with George Gershwin at the piano playing and singing bits from his current musical show to a crowd of people, among whom Theodore Dreiser sat, heavy and brooding, the finest anti-theater, almost a contradiction of all that Gershwin means. And Clinton Wylie sat, aloof and lovely, a contradiction and denial of all that both Dreiser and Gershwin mean. Later some women danced, and later still Paul Robeson sang. Last of all, James Weldon Johnson recited his "Ode to Death." And Carl hovered about in

doorways, his face, as always on such evenings, benevolent and shining. . . . The gold-fish is swimming happily and unconsciously in his own proper element. Everyone is at peace. And these people are gaily giving their best work for nothing; or, rather, for Carl.¹

Van Vechten still has parties and he still thrives in the animated atmosphere of New York, but his amusements and his activities and his life are modulated to suit the demands of the present. There is no anachronism about his active presence in an America three decades removed in time from Peter Whiffle, for Carl still honors Peter's discovery that "it is necessary to do only what one must, what one is forced by nature to do." He continues more and more to offer his service as humanitarian and appreciative observer, and he continues to enjoy immensely the people and the world about him. The vitality and the capacity for pleasure which marked the Twenties are still a part of Van Vechten, but the irresponsibilities of that era are behind him. When he emerged from the darkened theater and the ten-year matinee of amusement and escape, he realized he had seen a last performance. But he brought along with him into the sober daylight of the Thirties and Forties some of its most serviceable and memorable scenes.

¹Emily Clark, Innocence Abroad, pp. 144-145.

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¹ Emily Clark, Innocence Abroad, pp. 144-145.

Later decades may well censure the wayward emphasis of an era that set out, as every era does in its own way, to conquer boredom through some appealing pattern of life. But there is a certain element of inevitability that conditions the choice. If they had been selecting in 1920, or 1925, or even 1928, the chances are they would have chosen the same riotous pattern. They may not, however, have had the impudent honesty or the careless foresight to echo Peter Whiffle's impertinent defense of his folly, "It was all gay, irresponsible and meaningless, perhaps, but gay."¹

¹Peter Whiffle, p. 76.

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Peter Whiffle, p. 70.

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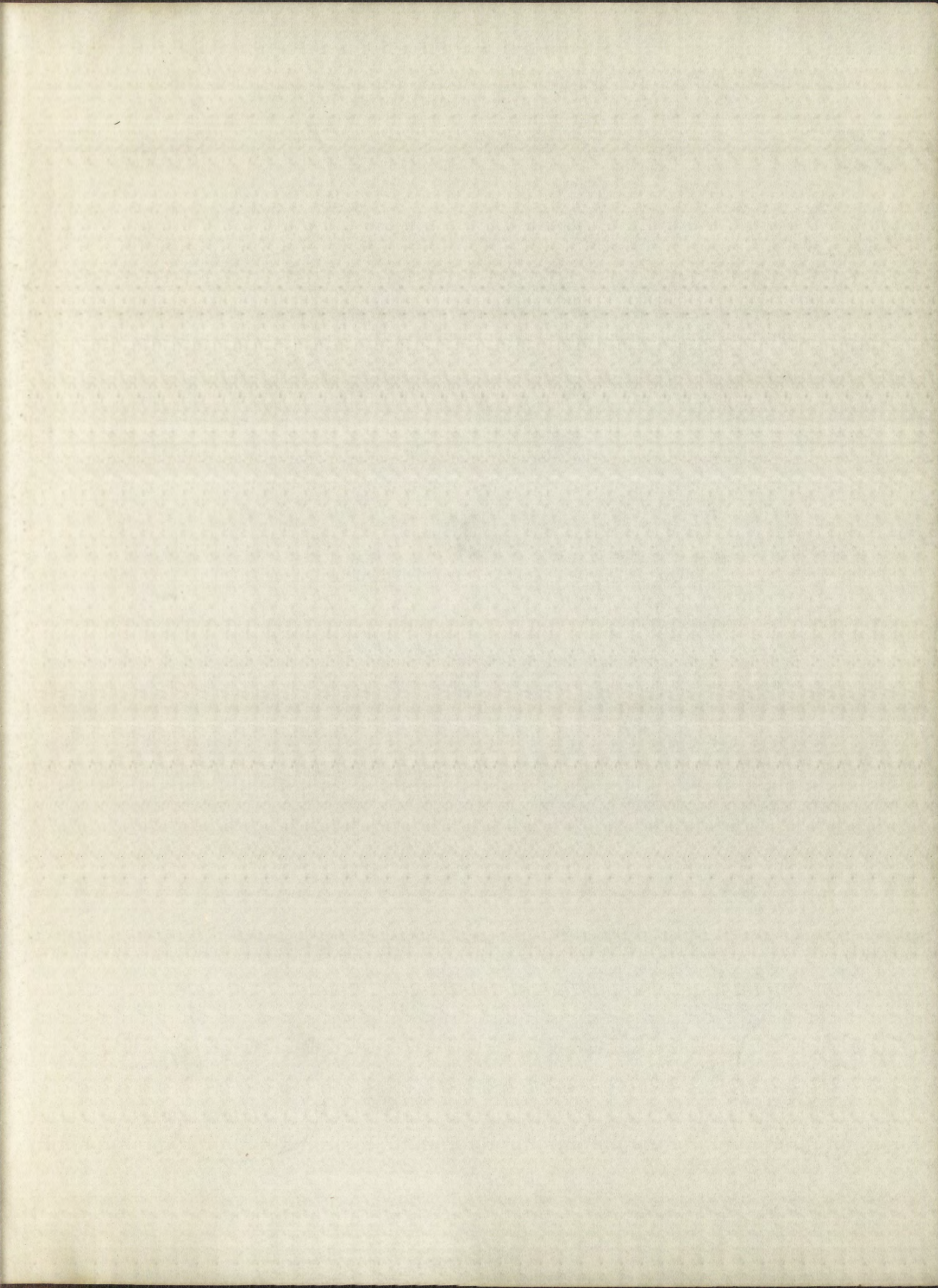
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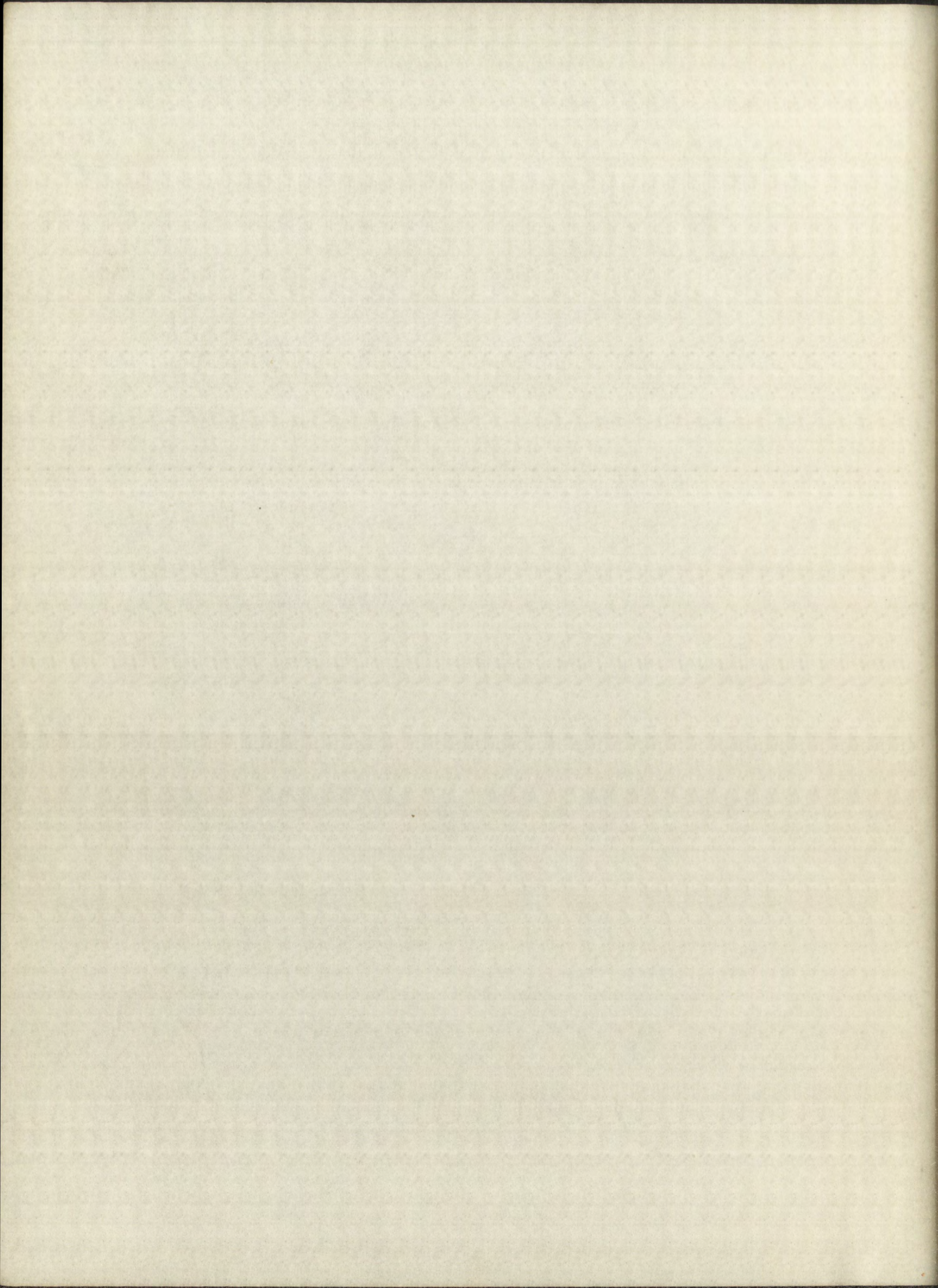
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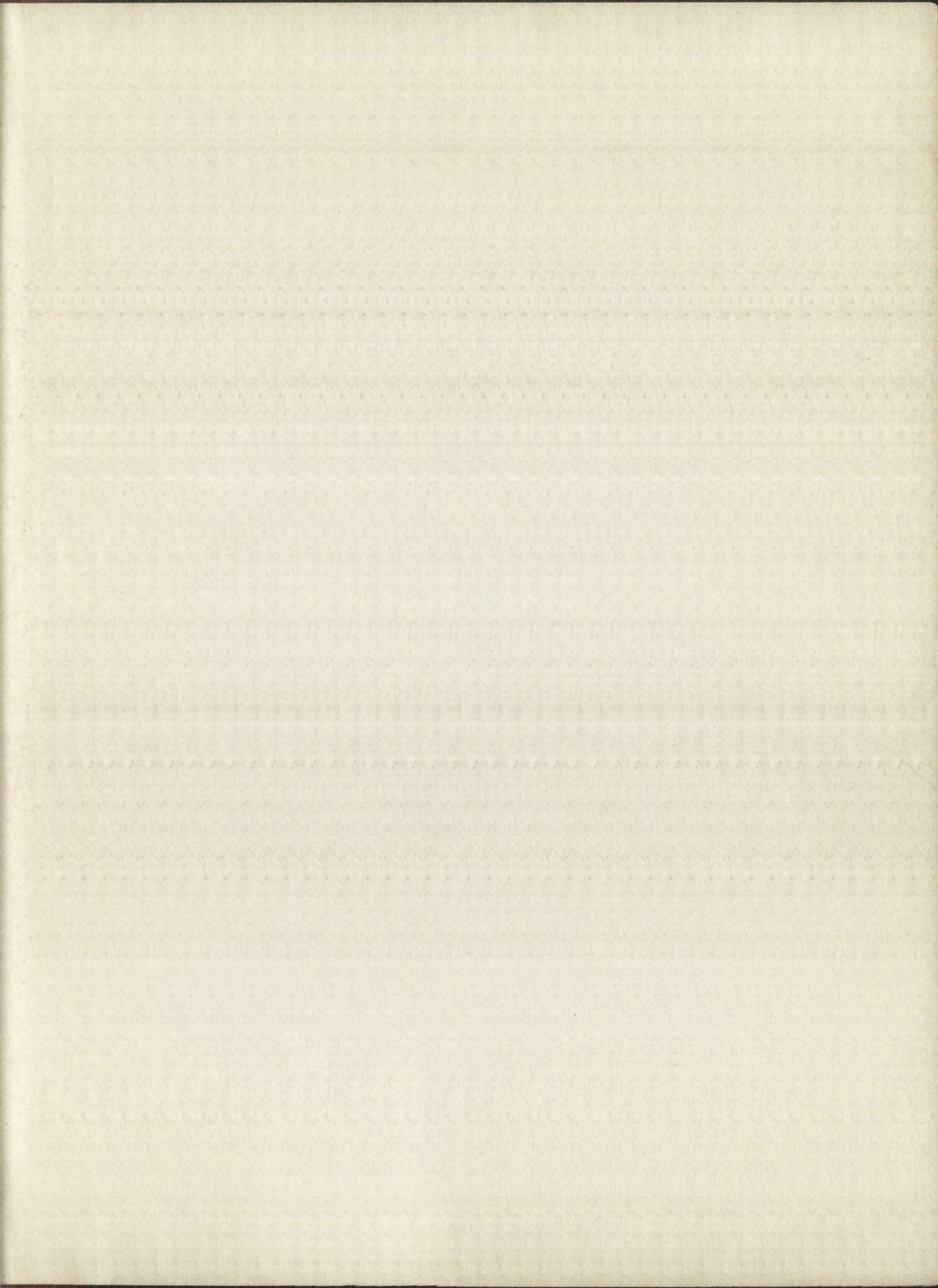
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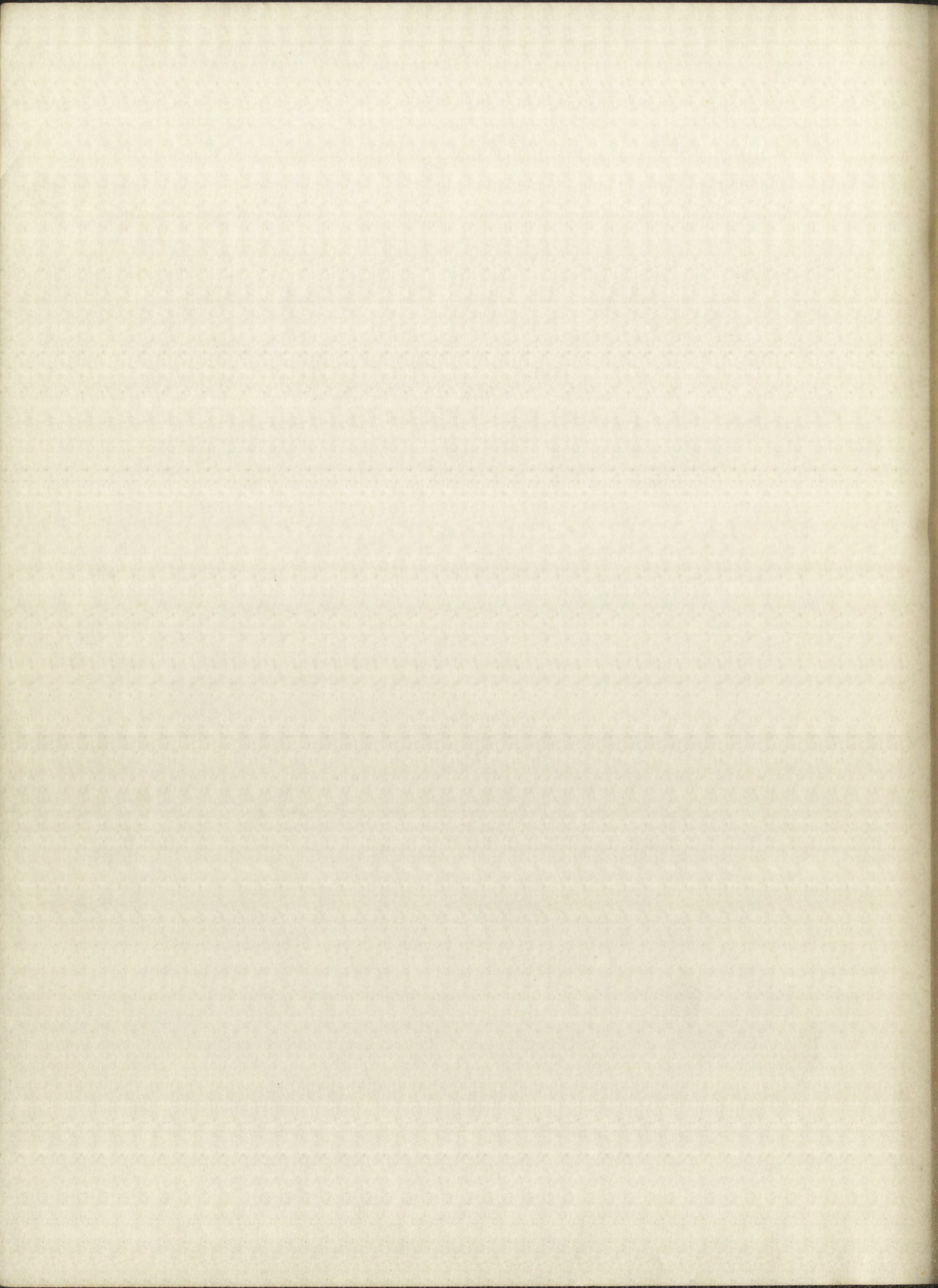
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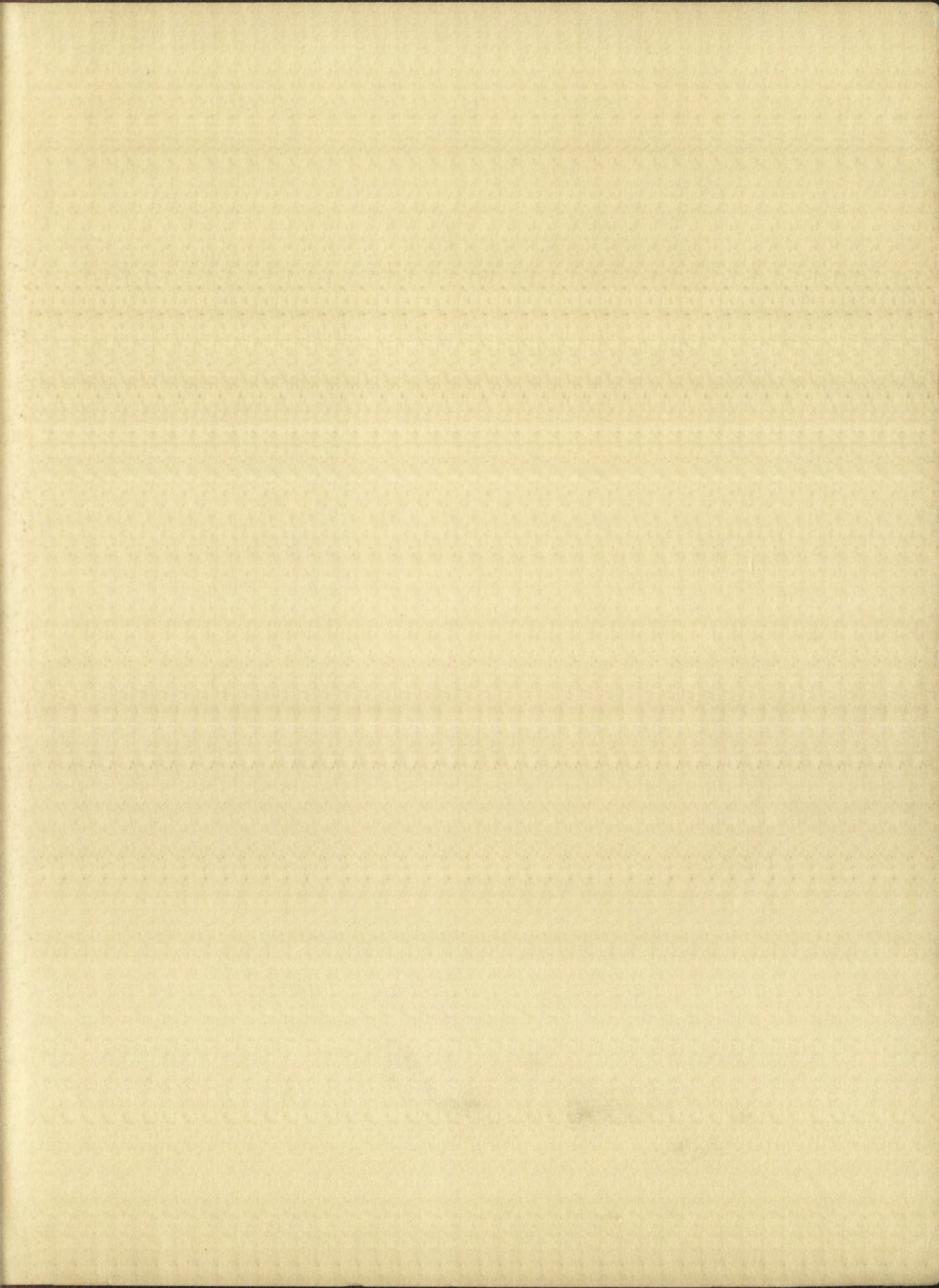
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