Books

Portrait of the Gangster


The cumulative effect of Young Lonigan (published 1932) and its sequel, The Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan, is exceedingly impressive. These two novels by James T. Farrell are the truest and most ruthless commentary upon street-Arab adolescence and manhood ever written in America. Young Lonigan is a study of a Chicago gang of boys from which our political life stems. Grown to maturity these drugstore cowboys, poolhall sharks, and killers on the make become ward heeler, racketeers and political leaders.

Since the characters belong somewhere in the upper brackets of the property classes, poverty is not the theme and the “mean streets” are not the milieu of either of these books. The special genre of brutal longings, the dehumanized, competitive desires, which characterize Studs Lonigan, the protagonist, belong to all America, and the sources from which they spring touch all shores and levels of society. The mind of the book, and not of the author, can be illustrated to some extent by the following: The reviewer, as a child, remembers looking into the window of a high-class cigar store and watching a thin, phthisical man, with a macabre, nicotine complexion, seated at a table, smoke one cigarette after another and drink milk and eat herring bars to sustain himself. This was in 1907 or 1908, and it was one of those horrendous endurance contests to which the exacerbated wealthy as well as the shipping clerk go for their catharses.

Since then the American psyche has reaped the pentecost of new technological discoveries. There is the cartoon, with sound effects, out of which jump abstract ghouls, mice, ghosts, the dismembered imaginings of bad dreams; Walt Disney’s confectionery fables for infantile minds. Then there were the Lloyd comedies of a few years back in which lovable, tortoise-shelled Harold inadvertently succeeded in whiping up the sadistic impulses of the “totalitarian” audience by precariously balancing himself on the ledge of a thirty story window. This is the background without which we cannot understand the neuroses of Studs Lonigan, Weary Reilly, Paulie Haggerty, Davy Cohen, Barney Keefe and others.

These Chicago Atillas, when not attending the Catholic parochial school, raid candy stores, steal milk, and attempt to set in motion race riots in order to give their lives the dramatic atmosphere of western pulp stories. Their sneaky pugilistic natures, their vandalistic and predatory habits of mind are harrowingly portrayed in a mimic war scene on a vacant lot. Standing in trenches which they have dug, these boys, protected by a Hooverville assortment of tin cans, boxes and barbed wire, hurl large rocks at one another. The raw, competitive motive of the American streets, which runs through our business, science, and art, is again made manifest in a football game in which the “home team” almost kills the fleet-footed Schwartz in order to win the game. And the same impulse of the street cannaille is seen in a snapshot of Armistice Day on a Chicago El.

When the playmates of Studs Lonigan have flowered into manhood, “the Alky Squad of 58th Street,” they become dipsomaniacs, contract venereal diseases, and die of tuberculosis. They are driven by the same kind of jungle appetites as compel Archibald MacLeish’s Wall Street conquistadors to outstrip their competitors in power and prestige.

The one moment of relief and respite in the book comes when Studs, cowed by the death of Arnold Sheehan, decides to join a Y gymnasium so that he can trim down his alcoholic “aldermen” and live to be a centenarian. However, this feeling of penitence is fugitive, for at the close of the book Studs Lonigan is lying in the gutter, drunk and unconscious, after a New Year’s rape party.

The two novels make a definite and original contribution to American literature. Unlike Jack Conroy’s prose, which is the remnants of writing that has been done in the past five to seven years, Farrell’s Americanese is enormously skillful and deeply fused.

Farrell’s novels are the intransigent documents of a fellow-traveler, and doubtless will not please certain snipers in the ranks of the pseudo-Marxists—these sharpshooters, with one essay and one review in their belts, who have never made any deviations for the simple reason that they have never written one creative or critical line that will last. It is altogether regrettable that some of the more original and sensitive minds in the movement have not yet done a book on the Marxist approach to American literature and spared us some of the leftist hemorrhages.

It is true, there are no strikes or demonstrations in Farrell’s novels. Besides that, there is scarcely a figure or a character that can be salvaged, and yet these books are highly serviceable to both workers and intellectuals.

If Mr. Farrell has taught us nothing more than how hooliganism arises, grows, and festers in this horrific America, and if he has shown us nothing else but where to look for the vandals, the Pelleys and Art Smiths, the American Storm Troopers, he has instructed us well and profoundly. Some day, in our future, classless society, readers will examine The Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan, and say, “Look what we were, and see what we have come through!”

Edward Dahlberg.