

STUDIES IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

Volume XXIII



JAMES THURBER: HIS MASQUERADES

A CRITICAL STUDY

by

STEPHEN A. BLACK

Simon Fraser University

1970

MOUTON

THE HAGUE • PARIS

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Printed in The Netherlands by Mouton & Co., Printers, The Hague.

For Gordon S. Black

FOREWORD AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The first version of this study was completed three years ago as a University of Washington doctoral dissertation. My respect for Thurber's work was based on haphazard reading, and was somewhat chastened by the apparent exclusion of Thurber from the canon of American literature. I wanted to test my assumption that Thurber deserves the kind of scholarly attention paid to such writers as Stephen Crane, Sherwood Anderson, Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor and other writers of short fiction. So my dissertation was begun in what I hope was a spirit of interested objectivity: I would try to assemble a considerable body of Thurber's work in order to describe its form. And I wanted to know if this work would support critical analysis. This study attempts to describe the movement and direction of Thurber's work (I do not refer to its chronological development), and it concludes that the work more than survives – that Thurber is very good indeed. This conclusion was, in fact, one of the few aspects of my original version which was not affected during a year of revision.

Now, after two more years of studying and teaching American literature, I find myself even more certain of Thurber's ultimate importance. The value of this study, however, does not lie in my opinions about relative literary merit. Rather, I hope that some of the things I say will provoke literary historians to consider the specific relation of Thurber's vision to the uses of comedy by novelists and short story writers of the fifties and sixties. Perhaps a few scholars will come to agree with me that Thurber's work is the primary transmission line between the "native American humor" of the nineteenth century and the tragicomic fiction of

such writers as Salinger, Bellow, Roth, Malamud, Heller and numerous others in the past two decades. Certainly, Thurber was almost the only comic writer of his generation whose fiction has consistent literary excellence. I hope that someone will soon explore the generic and historical implications of my conclusion: that, as Twain defines the "native" humor of the nineteenth century, Thurber defines the comedy of the present age. If this book is of use to such a future study it will have justified its existence.

I am happy for this opportunity to offer public thanks to people who have helped and encouraged me, most especially to James W. Hall of the University of Washington. Roger B. Stein, also at Washington, influenced subsequent revisions by his thoughtful comments on the first version. And Bickford Sylvester, of the University of British Columbia, offered many helpful suggestions during the first stages of this work. Finally, Mrs. Helen Thurber has given me invaluable assistance in assembling the copyright information included in my footnotes; she has my warmest thanks.

Two parts of this book have already appeared in print in slightly different forms. Much of Chapter I is reprinted with permission of the copyright owner, The Regents of the University of Wisconsin, from *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, V, No. 3 (Autumn, 1964), The University of Wisconsin Press. Its title, at that time, was "The Claw of the Sea-Puss: James Thurber's Sense of Experience." Most of Chapter Four appeared as "Thurber's Education for Hard Times" in *The University Review*, XXXII, No. 3 (Summer, 1966). I am grateful to the copyright owners for permission to reprint.

It is my pleasure to thank the President and the President's Committee of Simon Fraser University for a Research and Publication grant; I am most grateful for this assistance.

Since I was not married when I wrote this book it is difficult to follow scholarly convention and acknowledge my least expressible debt to my wife; nevertheless, I am generally grateful to her.

Whatever merit there may be in this book is due – far more

than they can know – to other scholars, especially those named above. None of them, however, is responsible for any errors or inadequacies of judgment.

North Vancouver, B.C., August, 1967

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INTRODUCTION

By the turn of this century, the disillusionment which accompanied all the manifestations of progress had begun to influence the new generation of writers – those who became the “naturalists”. The boast of these writers seemed to be: I know that the dream of democracy has foundered, that man is trapped in a hostile universe – and what’s more, I’m proud of my disillusionment for it proves my awareness of reality. Being alive was a grimly serious thing; comedy, under these circumstances, seemed almost an impudent repudiation of the newly discovered uncertainty, like Tom Sawyer telling Huck Finn that stealing a slave is a lark.

What little comedy existed then seems to support this view. According to Norris W. Yates, such humorists as John Kendrick Bangs, George Ade, Mr. Dooley, Kin Hubbard, Will Rogers, Irvin S. Cobb, and others, believed, in varying degrees, in “‘the reality, certainty, and eternity of moral values’”, were somewhat suspicious of “progress”, and were fully prepared to throw out “‘polite manners, respect for traditional learning, appreciation of the arts, and above all an informed and devoted love of standard literature’”.¹ (In the second and third of these articles of faith, their views were faint reflections of the serious writers – Crane, Norris, and Dreiser, for example.) Their comedy seemed to be the last vestige of “Native” humor, so crippled and deformed that it inspired a host of articles with such titles as “The Passing of the American Comic”, “Is American Humor Declining?”, “Slump in Humor”, “A Retrospect on American Hu-

¹ Norris Yates, *The American Humorist* (Ames, Iowa, Iowa State University Press, 1964), pp. 137-139.