

Introduction

When he was in Stockholm to receive his Nobel Prize for Literature, John Steinbeck told an audience of eager listeners: “The writer is delegated to declare and to celebrate man’s proven capacity for greatness of heart and spirit—for gallantry in defeat—for courage, compassion and love. In the endless war against weakness and despair, these are the bright rally-flags of hope and of emulation.” Indeed, the writers who matter to us look to find and celebrate this greatness of heart and spirit that Steinbeck mentioned here, whether they should be novelists, poets, playwrights, critics, or memoirists.

In this twentieth volume of *American Writers*, we offer articles on American writers who choose a wide variety of genres; they are all accomplished figures who have displayed many of the virtues that Steinbeck notes above, yet none of them has yet been featured in this series before. Readers who wish to look more thoroughly into the work of these writers will find many things here to interest them: biographical and historical context, close readings of major texts, and supplementary material designed to enhance the reading of the individual subject and his or her work.

This series itself had its beginnings in a series of critical and biographical monographs that appeared between 1959 and 1972. The *Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers* achieved considerable fame in their days; they were incisively written and informative, treating ninety-seven American writers in a format and style that attracted a devoted following of readers. The series proved invaluable to a generation of students and teachers, who could depend on these reliable and interesting critiques of major figures. The idea of reprinting these essays occurred to Charles Scribner, Jr. (1921–

1995). The series appeared in four volumes entitled *American Writers: A Collection of Literary Biographies* (1974).

Since then, twenty supplements have appeared, treating hundreds of well-known and less known American writers: poets, novelists, playwrights, essayists and autobiographers, literary critics. The idea has been consistent with the original series: to provide informative essays aimed at the general reader. These essays often rise to a high level of craft and critical vision, but they are meant to introduce a body of work of some importance in the history of American literature, and to provide a sense of the scope and nature of the career under review. Each article puts the writer in the context of his or her time.

Our critics here have published books and articles in their field, and anyone glancing through this volume might pause to admire the good writing and sound scholarship. Every attempt has been made to see that this work meets the highest standards of critical acumen and factual accuracy. The articles describe the shape of a career, in detail, and each concludes with a select bibliography intended to direct the reading of those may wish to pursue the subject.

Supplement XX treats a range of authors from the past and present. Phillis Wheatley—a major poet from the eighteenth century—has for whatever reason been overlooked thus far, and it is good that we could include an essay on her in this volume. Most of the writers included here are from the twentieth century, although Mary Antin, Waldo Frank, Khalil Gibran, Gene Stratton-Porter, and Howard Overing Sturgis were certainly born in the nineteenth, although their working lives extended well into the twentieth. The rest of our subjects—T.C. Boyle,

Timothy Findley, Jonathan Franzen, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Anne Lamott, Reginald McKnight, Jim Wayne Miller, Tova Mirvis, Floyd Skloot, Leon Uris, and Patricia Nell Warren—were all born in the twentieth, and most of them continue to produce books today. While they have been written about in journals and newspapers, few of them have had the kind of sustained critical attention they deserve, and we hope to provide a beginning here.

The writers here certainly represent a range of backgrounds and critical approaches, though we insisted that each essay should be accessible to the non-specialist reader or beginning student;

that is, we did not allow the kind of critical jargon that is so prevalent in the criticism in our time. One could argue that the creation of culture involves the continuous reassessment of major texts, and my belief is that this collection of critical articles performs a healthy service here, offering substantial introductions to American writers who have found a sympathetic readership because of the high quality of their productions, their attempts to aim high, sticking to the high ideals mentioned by John Steinbeck above.

—*JAY PARINI*