



# ROARING TWENTIES, TROUBLED TIMES: Writers' Impressions of Detroit

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Before Detroit's image in the national media became synonymous with blight and crime, many writers and novelists offered differing accounts of its 1920s prosperity and the troubled Depression era that followed. Detroit's industrial might—depicted in Diego Rivera's mural, *Detroit Industry* and Charles Sheeler's photographs and precisionist paintings—earned the praise and scorn of prominent writers, pitting those city-of-the-future advocates against those condemning it as a power center of exploitive capitalism. These literary voices greatly attributed to Detroit's reputation in early times of boom and bust as a place of industry and order, Prohibition crime and labor unrest. Literary lights from Ernest Hemingway to John Dos Passos to Gertrude Stein visited and recorded their impressions: some tributes, others expressions of fear and hostility.

Into the first half of the nineteenth century, Detroit contained a small population along an important waterway of shipping and commerce. In search of Native Americans in the Michigan Territory, French writer Alexis de Tocqueville traveled west by steamboat in 1831. First stopping in Detroit, he found an unimpressive "small town of two or three thousand souls," with only vestiges of its former French presence. Six years later, English naval officer and author Captain Frederick Marryat, offered promising words describing Detroit's "large

Eastern population” that would soon make it “one the most flourishing cities in America.’ Writing largely for his British readership, novelist Anthony Trollope, in his 1862 travel book *North America*, describes Detroit as “a large well-built half-finished city” of about 70,000. Trollope thought Detroit a bustling place of business, “neither pleasant nor picturesque at all.” But as he resumed his travels westward, he reflected that his disinterest in Detroit may have stemmed from its having no “rising ground” or cliffs upon its riverbank.

Before the Civil War, escaped slaves found freedom by crossing from Detroit into Canada, a route often taken by escaping dissidents and criminals. In Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (1900) Carrie Meeber and her money-stealing lover, George Hurstwood, spend the night in Detroit before fleeing across the river to Canada.

With the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment in January 1920, Prohibition made for a Detroit-Windsor underground connection of illegal alcohol. That same year, Ernest Hemingway, a young *Toronto Star* reporter, covered this cross-border activity and in a Detroit alley came upon a young man nearly poisoned to death by homemade booze. Hemingway informed his readers: “Canadian whiskey can be bought by the case from bootleggers in almost all of Michigan border towns for one hundred and twenty dollars a case. Single quarts cost fifteen dollars. There is plenty of liquor and there are plenty of purchasers and price seems to be no deterrent.” By mid-decade, law enforcement could not keep pace curtailing the importation and consumption of alcohol.

In 1922 Detroit became a smuggling route for literature, when Hemingway’s journalist friend, Barnet Braverman, helped smuggle James Joyce’s banned 1922 novel, *Ulysses*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In 1920 The New York Society for the Prevention of Vice seized copies of *Ulysses* when it was being serialized in the New York-based *The Little Review*. The magazine’s editors, Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap, were convicted in court of breaking the obscenity law. *Ulysses* then became “subject to seizure, forfeiture and confiscation and destruction” until the United States District Court lifted the ban in 1933.

through Windsor into Detroit. Living in Detroit and working in Windsor, Braverman declared forty copies as cheap novels and got them past U.S. customs in Detroit, marking the first time Joyce's novel entered the country without its confiscation and destruction. As Hemingway's biographer Kenneth Lynn points out, "The novel that would have set off alarm bells in the New York customs shed aroused no sign of recognition in Detroit."

But it was illegal booze, not great modern literature that helped to define Detroit's image. In his 1925 novel, *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's bootlegging Jay Gatsby keeps his phone line open "for long distance from Detroit." More than once mentioned by way of phone conversation, Detroit was no doubt a supplier of illegal alcohol that made Gatsby a wealthy man. That same year *The Outlook* ran the article, "Detroit Sets a Bad Example," voicing the author's shock at the estimated fifteen to twenty thousand blind pigs flourishing behind storefronts and apartment buildings, some run by women, sold narcotics and were places where "crime plots hatched."

A drinker of illegal Prohibition alcohol, George Babbitt—Sinclair Lewis' Rotarian and civic booster in the 1922 novel *Babbitt*—delivers an address before Ohio's Zenith Real Estate Board in which he speaks out against New York, Chicago and San Francisco as being "cursed with un-numbered foreigners," while his "golden roster" of cities included "Detroit and Cleveland with their renowned factories." As opposed to Babbitt's praise of Detroit's industry, Lewis despised Henry Ford as a semi-literate anti-Semite, conspiratorially fearful of New York's Jewish millionaires.

A writer who spared few his sharp-edged barbs, H. L. Mencken praised Henry Ford as America's embodiment of progress and Detroit as a leading manufacturing center that offered workers hopes for a better-quality life. He lauded Henry Ford as a successful self-made man, and his quotations were used by Ford distributors for advertising the Model A. Amid Prohibition Mencken favorably reported in 1923 that "men in Ford plants stick to their jobs longer than the men in

other automobile plants out there, and seem have more money, and are generally more contented. They drink better liquor than even judges and bishops in New York; they wear good clothes and have money in the bank. . . . [T]heir wives spend the afternoons window-shopping, home-brewing, or lolling in movie parlors.”

Whereas Mencken admired Detroit’s economic opportunities, novelist Sherwood Anderson feared its industrialism would destroy American individualism. Typically, Anderson pointed to Henry Ford as the city’s primary threat to the nation. In his 1924 *A Story Teller’s Story*, Anderson’s narrator warns that Ford “has done more than any other man of my day to carry standardization to its logical end.” Anderson’s narrator condemned Ford as possibly the “the great killer of his age” and concluded by intoning: “Tamerlane for the ancients. Ford for the moderns . . .”

Exemplary of the writers opposing the cult of the machine, Anderson contrasted the avant-gardists heralding its transformative power in life and art. Writer and poet Matthew Josephson—fresh from Paris in 1923 where he had fallen in with the avant-garde circle of dadaist provocateurs—envisioned Henry Ford’s Detroit as a capital of the machine aesthetic. In the little magazine *Broom*, Josephson published his poem, “The Brain at the Wheel”:

With the Brain at the wheel  
the eye on the road  
and the hand to the left  
pleasant be your progress  
explorer, producer, stoic after your fashion  
Change  
to what speed?—  
to what underwear?  
. . . nothing surprises you, old horseface  
guzzle-guzzle goes the siren . . .

Later Josephson marveled at Ford’s River Rouge plant, awed by a five-story-high press that within minutes crushed rail-

road cars and trucks into pulverized scrap. Its mechanized sounds he claimed superior to those of avant-garde composer Edgard Varèse's works rife with siren and machines noises. Yet he opined, echoing Anderson's concern, that mass industrialism could dehumanize the worker. It was the goal for artists, Josephson's so-called skyscraper primitives, to "make the machine our magnificent slave."

By 1927 Detroit, riding the wave of prosperity, boasted a new world-class art museum and J.L. Hudson's department store, the largest of its kind in the world. In the following year, Ernest Hemingway's sister, Marceline, a former Chicagoan married to a successful Detroit Edison engineer, wrote in a letter: "We have had a quite a gay winter here and I feel like a Detroiter. It takes about 4 or 5 years to get acclimated to this city if you have no introductions. So many thousands come each year that no one can blame the old residents for being clannish."

But tough times lay ahead. After the 1929 Crash, soup lines formed, and families slept in vacant lots. On December 3, 1929, two months after the Crash, mystic poet and avant-garde publisher Harry Crosby checked into the Book-Cadillac Hotel. There in a twelfth-floor room, Crosby and his lover sought refuge from New York City's social and art circles, spending days taking opium pills. In his journal Crosby made reference to twelve-hour sleeps "pillowed between silks," "drinking rum in tea cups," and taking the newly opened Ambassador Bridge to Canada. Several days after leaving Detroit, Crosby made nationwide headlines when he shot himself and his lover in a New York apartment. Considered by literary scholar and writer Malcom Cowley as symbolizing the end of a decade of excess, Crosby's suicide could have been equally metaphoric if it had occurred in the center of industry rather than the shadows of Wall Street.

Meanwhile, some writers made Henry Ford a prime target in criticizing industrial capitalism. Walter Lippman warned in *Preface to Morals* (1929) that Henry Ford's cars would "destroy the whole culture which produced them." In the *New Republic*

prominent literary theorist and critic Kenneth Burke, wrote a 1930 essay dedicated to Henry Ford, “Waste—The Future of Prosperity.” For Burke, Americans were victims of economic forces like “Fordism,” turned into reckless consumers—“wasters,” reveling in useless products.

Equally condemnatory of Detroit’s automotive pioneer, Edmund Wilson, an eminent critic and independent Marxist, visited Detroit and perceived the entire city as living under Ford’s overlordship. No stranger to Detroit, Wilson, as a volunteer army recruit during World War I, bivouacked nearly ten weeks on the State Fairgrounds. The drudgery of drill and latrine duty was partially relieved by his visiting the Grosse Pointe home of a friend and fellow soldier. On his unit’s departure he recalled the immensity of the downtown crowd that gathered to see them off to war—“roads so full . . . that four soldiers abreast could hardly get through.”

In a lengthy 1931 *New Republic* article, “Detroit Motors,” Wilson admired “the spectacular” Masonic Temple, the Penobscot Building, and the newly constructed Fisher Building, its theater looking like “a Mayan temple.” Wilson also commented favorably on Detroit’s Waterworks, with its majestic tower, and the giant stove along Jefferson Avenue. Yet he disliked the smaller structures sprawling across the city: “drab yellow and red brick houses, sometimes with bland rock-candy columns, or a dash of crass Romanesque, tight, dreary, old, long-windowed mansions with fancy copulas and jig-sawed work.”

Another prominent writer, Wilson’s novelist friend John Dos Passos, made Detroit a livelier subject of reportage and fiction. In 1932 Dos Passos found the city “thoroughly interesting,” and it gave him, as he explained in a letter, “the impression that main street was reddening up—was full of good beer and cool northerly winds.” The phrase “reddening up” most likely referred to the radicalized workers he encountered in parks and street corners. Dos Passos’ travel piece “Detroit, City of Leisure,” a title not without irony, described the unemployed and their hangouts, the daily meeting ground of Grand

Circus Park—“the social center,” for hundreds of unemployed men, some lying on newspapers so as not to ruin their last suit of clothes.

By the time of his visit, Dos Passos had planned the writing of *The Big Money*, the third novel eventually making up his major 1936 work, *U.S.A.* In its satirizing of American life, *The Big Money* captures—through its various characters, newspaper headlines, newsreel sections, and popular songs lyrics—the excitement and excesses of the 1920s, along with those who fought against big business and advanced the plight of labor. One of the novel’s central characters, Midwestern mechanic and World War I aviator ace, Charlie Anderson, is caught up in the chase for illegal alcohol, wild women, and making it rich as an airplane-engine inventor.

Charlie’s mechanical talents land him a job with a Detroit-based airplane manufacturer that plans to compete with Ford Motor Company’s aviation division. Wined and dined by his new employers, Charlie occupies a “very nice inexpensive elevator apartment opposed to the Museum of Municipal Art [the Detroit Institute of Art].” He tours the company’s unfinished building among “a ring” of other new unfinished buildings in Grand Circus Park. At a lavish Detroit Athletic Club dinner, Charlie expresses his elation at leaving New York for Detroit—“glad,” as he said, to “be back in the grand open spaces and the real manufacturing center of this country . . . of the whole bloody world.” Charlie marries into a successful family and moves into a new Tudor-style home on Gross Pointe’s riverfront. But he is used by greedy investors and leaves Detroit after an adulterous affair, finally dying in a car crash running red lights while keeping pace with a passing train.

On a visit from her Parisian residence, Getrude Stein came to Detroit in 1933 to promote her *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. Stein’s apolitical outlook contrasted with the leftwing writers who deemed Detroit a capitalist power center. Open to what she would find in this French-named city, she judged her hotel room too large, but the food of good quality. On her walks she “kind of liked” the “back streets that might have been French

that is things they did in them but they were American and therefore frightening as French things are not frightening.” Stein opined: “America having begun the creation of the twentieth century in the sixties of the nineteenth century is now the oldest country in the world.” If one accepts Stein’s assessment, Detroit would be one of the world’s oldest cities, as it advanced and declined at an unparalleled pace in modern history.

Symbol of America’s triumph of machines, Detroit was an ominous subject for French novelist Louis-Ferdinand Celine. A doctor employed by the League of Nations’ Hygiene Section, Celine visited Dearborn’s Ford River Rouge plant in March 1924. His observations were later published in the 1928 article “Medicine at the Ford Factory.” He found medical care and hygiene at Ford adequate since it prevented a high turn-over rate among workers. Yet he believed that pride in one’s work was being destroyed by factory labor.

After having spent only one day in Dearborn, Celine later created a fictitious Detroit in his first novel *Journey to the End of the Night* (1934). The novel’s Ferdinand Bardamu, after living in Parisian squalor and making his way westward, works at Ford Motor Company. Bardamu likens Detroit to a mass factory, an impersonal wasteland of “squat buildings all of glass,” looking like “enormous dollhouses.” Bardamu fears that the factory will transform him into a machine. He rides the streetcars nightly, observing the white-faced, sleepy passengers returning to the suburbs. Amid the constant machine sounds, Bardamu finds the only instance of human companionship in Molly the prostitute, a genuine soul among the impersonal throng.

Celine’s dark vision also influenced Henry Miller, who had come from Parisian expatriation back to America. Enamoured with Parisian slums and cafe life, Miller left France before the 1940 Nazi occupation, returning to America embittered, anti-war and anti-capitalist. In his book *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* (1945), Miller judged Detroit as “not the worst city,” but a “capital of the new planet—the one, I mean that will kill itself off—is of course Detroit. . . . Everything is too new, too slick, too bright, too ruthless. Souls don’t grow in factories. Souls are



killed in factories.” In Miller’s hyperbolic and vitriolic observations, Detroiters are “always buying and selling” or being menaced by “futilitarian salesmen.” They work in buildings that are “straight and cruel.” Published the year of the Allied victory in World War II, *Air Conditioned Nightmare* found a limited audience, for the world looked upon Detroit as the “arsenal of democracy.”

Published in 1957, and almost single-handedly creating a new postwar counterculture, Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*, depicts Detroit’s slums, most memorably in the novel’s iconic Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty’s overnight stay in an all-night movie theater among winos and prostitutes. In subsequent novels Kerouac wrote about his visits to Detroit and Grosse Point Park in search of his lost love, Eddie Parker.

Over the coming decades Detroit remained in the media spotlight. *Time* magazine, while regularly featuring Big Three Detroit executives on its cover, also often maligned Detroit as a place that, as one 1960s *Time* article asserted, cared little about the attractiveness of its downtown. If one takes at face value writers’ various depictions and accounts, it is almost as if they were describing several different cities. Most of the prominent writers never delved deeply into the lives of those who experienced the city in its heyday. Detroiters with a profound sense of place have defied with steely resolve and underdog perseverance the often-negative portrayal of their city, knowing there is more here than meets the casual critic’s eye.

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