REALISM was not dead; submerged though it was by the stronger and more sensational current of modernism, it still continued, its traditions intact, its horizons even widening. Realism in the twenties had two directions—the picturization of the appearance of American life, or what was later called the "American Scene," which, in spite of its surface objectivity often implied critical attitudes; and the more obviously critical art of social protest. The latter was kept alive in the pages of such radical publications as the *Liberator*, a direct descendant of the *Masses*; *Good Morning*, Art Young's attempt to rival such European journals as *Gil Blas*, *Assiette au Beurre*, *Jugend*, and *Simplicissimus*; and finally the *New Masses*, the new rallying place for a reemerging art of social protest. While the spirit of political and social criticism was kept alive in the cartoons and drawings of these magazines, the continuation of the realist tradition in the more sanctified realm of the "fine" arts was spearheaded during this period by two artists—Edward Hopper and Charles Burchfield.

Edward Hopper had direct roots in the Ash Can tradition. But, although he had exhibited with the leading Henri pupils in 1908, when he sold his first picture, he was almost completely ignored for fifteen years (except for a painting sold at the Armory Show) while he worked as an illustrator. In 1923 he managed to sell another picture at the watercolor exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum. From then on he was recognized as one of America's leading painters. In 1923 he managed to sell another picture at the watercolor exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum. From then on he was recognized as one of America's leading painters. At about the same time, Charles Burchfield was heralded in England as an original and authentic American artist, which in turn led to his sudden discovery in this country.

It should be remembered that beginning with Henri, the spirit of nationalism was a fundamental of the realists' attitude. They accepted as axiomatic that an American art should deal realistically with life and, conversely, that a realistic art should concern itself with America. However, this inherent nationalism was tempered, among the early realists, by their theoretical adherence to an ideal of humanitarian internationalism and an insistence that American art could arise only through the free expression of the individual spirit. It was the latter doctrine which led them to fight for the principles underlying the Armory Show and the Independents'. Their nationalism caused them a little later to fight the threat of foreign invasion. Hopper retained some of this theoretical idealism, but since he was active in a period of growing nationalism, he was much more insistent upon Americanism than was Henri, who was active in a period of internationalism. In the American artist, Henri always sought the artist, whereas the realists of the twenties always sought in him the American. Burchfield wrote of Hopper, "Edward Hopper is an American. . . . It is my conviction . . . that the bridge to international appreciation is the national bias. . . ." And Hopper wrote an article on Burchfield called "Charles Burchfield: American." Thus while the early realists fought for the recognition of American art as a whole, the later realists fought for the recognition of the American subject. Though this latter attitude was decidedly more nationalist than the former it was not yet, as it became in the thirties, with Thomas Benton, Grant Wood and John Curry, outspokenly chauvinistic.

While Dreiser in literature like the early realists in painting, sought the fullness of life in the large cities, Sinclair Lewis and the later realists sought a peculiarly American form of life in the small towns. As part of the postwar isolationist revulsion against Wilsonian internationalism, these artists sought a native tradition, a center of life typical of America and innocent of sophistication. Among our writers this search for a stable heritage in the hinterland of small towns and farms was often converted into a critical attack upon the poverty and narrowness of such existence. It was at once a desire to find an anchor in a world of shattered illusions and at the same time a criticism of the anchor itself because it had chains. A similar attitude is evident in the art of Hopper and Burchfield. Both have gone back to the provincial aspects of American life and have pictured the most depressing and ugliest features of its physical appearance. They have found the architectural remains of another age, a symbol of the constrictions of an unlovely past, to be the echo of the barren present. Neither Burchfield nor Hopper are, however, unreliedly critical, and the same may be said for such writers as Sinclair Lewis and Sherwood Anderson. Behind it all, more so in Burchfield than in Hopper, there is a deep attachment for the past and for the provincial, an attachment which is based not simply on the
sentimental regard for that which is their own, but on a romantic longing for an agrarian past. It may all be musty in decay and ugly; but it is native and symbolic of a more perfect era, and that for the “American Scenists” of the twenties was the important consideration. The Ash Can search for life had thus been transformed into a search for those specifically native characteristics which were to be found in the small town rather than the large city.

In any comparison between Hopper and Burchfield it should be remembered that Hopper had developed directly out of the Ash Can style. His earliest works were done in the gray tonalities and bold brushwork characteristic of that school. His contact with Impressionism, his eventual development of an individual style, and his later orientation toward the provincial scene did not wipe out those earlier memories. Hopper has never entirely forsaken the city as subject matter. Unlike Burchfield, who is interested only in the small town, Hopper’s horizon is wide enough to encompass both. Especially in such etchings as East Side Interior (1922) and Evening Wind (1921) and such paintings as Two on the Aisle (1927) he is still the outstanding inheritor of the Ash Can tradition, retaining in these some of the warmth that most of his other work lacks. On the whole, Hopper’s turn toward the provincial affected his outlook upon the city. He sees it now as a stranger might, as a bleak and forbidding place where one wanders lost and alone. The city for Hopper is not a place where children play in the streets or women gossip, but a place where one rents a room for a night or eats a lonely meal in a brightly lit cafeteria.

This bleakness in Hopper’s outlook became evident in the twenties. It arose out of his conception of provincial America, for the uncompromising harshness which he found in small-town life corresponded to his own ascetic concept of realism. This he expressed clearly in his article on Burchfield, in

Edward Hopper, Two on the Aisle. The Toledo Museum of Art
which he inadvertently describes his own art so well. He wrote, "Good painting (so-called), that degenerate legacy to us from the late Renaissance, has no place in this writing down of life; the concentration is too intense to allow the hand to flourish playfully about." The truth is that Burchfield allows not only his hand but his mind "to flourish playfully about," but not so Hopper. His style is completely and unwaveringly realistic. His use of light, which is the trademark of his style, grows out of this same intensity of purpose; it is not a mannerism but an integral part of his peculiar brand of realism. Hopper uses a cold, hard illumination to make reality more concentrated, more intense. Although he originally developed his treatment of light out of Impressionism, he has no interest now in the varying phenomena of light. He eschews the diffusion of light or the beauty of color in favor of a sharp, clearly focused heightening of reality, as Caravaggio did in another age and with other means.

The America which Hopper paints is a bleak land. He finds no warmth in its streets, its houses, or its people, and the light with which he is so prodigal illuminates but never warms. He paints the closed look of a many-windowed tenement façade which Sloan would have brought alive with human incident. He paints the ugly scars which industry has made upon the landscape, the forbidding buildings of Blackwell's Island, or a monotonous row of closed stores on a Sunday morning. This is not the pretty side of American life, and it is because of this predilection for bleakness that a critical attitude is imputed to Hopper. Burchfield makes the claim that Hopper is not a satirist but an objective realist, a claim with which Hopper is in hearty agreement. Burchfield wrote of Hopper, "Some have read an ironic bias in some of his paintings; but I believe this is caused by the coincidence of his coming to the fore at a time when, in our literature, the American small towns and cities were being lampooned so viciously; so that almost any straightforward and honest presentation of the American scene was thought of necessity to be satirical." Hopper's own statement, "My aim in painting has always been the most exact transcription possible of my most intimate impressions of nature," is a confirmation of his belief in his own objectivity. These opinions, however, were written about 1930 and so are not
necessarily an accurate analysis of the ideas which motivated Hopper as well as Burchfield in the twenties. Although Hopper pretends to objectivity, the very asceticism of his manner assumes a critical significance. His selection of material, which reflects his attitude toward the American scene, is in itself basically critical. Hopper, during the twenties and most of the thirties, found no beauty in America. He did find, sometimes in the twenties and more often in the thirties, a certain power and grandeur in the very sharp, biting glare of simple forms seen in brilliant, clear light.

It has been told of Hopper that once on a visit to New Mexico he wandered for days disconsolate because amidst all the splendor of the southwestern landscape he could find nothing to paint. He finally returned one day happy with a water color of an abandoned locomotive. Obviously, New Mexico did not conform to Hopper’s idea of America. There was probably too much sheer beauty in it, too much natural composition. The locomotive must have made him feel at home, like an American tourist in the depths of Europe confronted by a sign advertising Coca-Cola.

Hopper’s bland dictum that “anything will make a good composition” is another reflection of his pretensions toward an unrelenting realism. He conceives of realism as unpremeditated and anti-formal. His vision is essentially snapshot; but whereas the same is true of the earlier realists—Sloan, for instance, insisted on the fleeting nature of incident—Hopper freezes his momentarily seen figures into the same stern immobility which rules all of his world. In a Hopper painting one feels the combination of the recording of the fleeting moment coupled with the insistence upon the permanent quality of matter, uncompromisingly stated as seen in the glare of bright light.

Charles Burchfield has none of Hopper’s abhorrence of the personal and no pretensions to objectivity. Burchfield is a romantic and has been recognized as such. Yet he has always been counted among the realists. The explanation is simple enough. He is both. His art is a combination of the two opposing tendencies, on the one hand, a romanticism relying heavily on the “Gothic” and, on the other, a realism based upon a critical attitude toward modern industrialism.

Burchfield’s romantic imagination found its strongest expression in his earliest artistic efforts, the water colors of 1916-1918. It took the form of a transcription of childhood emotions, a peculiar type of “Gothic” romanticism which is characteristic of Burchfield’s artistic personality, though not at all unique, being common to a number of contemporary literary figures developed in the midwest. His youthful fantasies are a plastic counterpart of the many autobiographical stories and novels of Sherwood Anderson, Floyd Dell, and a host of other writers, a literature which, in spite of its realism, contains a romantic glorification of the free spirit of childhood, with all its latent potentialities, as it grows up in the midst of the stifling atmosphere of the small town. To these writers the child assumed the stature of a symbol of the individual’s struggles against the stultification of provincial existence. Burchfield’s water colors, however, have no such implications, being merely direct translations of daydreams and romantic fantasies. His endeavor to express the emotions of mystery and terror in almost abstract symbols is analogous to Edvard Munch’s excursions into the realm of plastic transcription of emotional states. But Burchfield’s sources are much simpler. His art comes out of a deep-seated and naive anthropomorphic folklore, which sees the world of nature peopled with lurking spirits and mysterious forces. Thus in The Night Wind (1918), as he himself explained, the roar of the wind fills the child’s mind “full of visions of strange phantoms and monsters flying over the land.” In this same tradition, if slightly more explicit and literal, are Art Young’s drawings in Trees of Night, some of which are strikingly similar to the early Burchfield water colors. The overtones of “Gothicism,” which Sherwood Anderson attempted to rationalize through psychological and sexual motivation, and which Burchfield and Art Young treated simply as pictorial anthropomorphic fantasy, are related to the older romantic “Gothic” tradition of which Edgar Allan Poe and Albert P. Ryder are exponents.

The other aspect of Burchfield’s art, his realism, must be seen in relation to his home town of Salem, Ohio, and the period in which he reached maturity, for it was there and then that he formed his concept of the American scene. Because Burchfield experienced the postwar industrial depression in Salem, an industrial and mining town of southeastern Ohio, with all the dreary meanness such conditions produce, his picture of America was essentially critical. He was, during the early twenties at least, in spite of his underlying romanticism, one of the most
uncompromising realists we have ever produced. Henry McBride even dubbed these first realistic water colors of about 1920 "Songs of Hate." Burchfield himself claimed in retrospect, "I was not indicting Salem, Ohio, but was merely giving way to a mental mood, and sought out the scenes that would express it—where I could not find, I created, which is perfectly legitimate. Much, however, I hated justly and would like to go on hating to my last breath—modern industrialism, the deplorable conditions in certain industrial fields such as steelworks and mining sections, American smugness and intolerance, and conceited provincialism—to mention only a few of our major evils." In spite of the disavowal of any fundamental cause for this hatred except that of personal mood, Burchfield’s art was an indictment of the effects of modern industrialism, of its resulting ugliness and poverty. The ramshackle clapboard houses of the poor, the fantastic Gothic mansions of the rich, the rows of false-fronted stores, the rutted, rain-soaked roads, the mines, the mills, and the railroads became his subject matter and the embodiment of his resentment. His palette borrowed drabness from the gray skies, the smoke, and the soot-covered landscape.

The emergence of Sherwood Anderson as a literary figure had a marked effect on Burchfield; according to his own testimony *Winesburg, Ohio* paved the way for his own acceptance of the midwest as subject matter. Burchfield was very much like Sherwood Anderson in that his revolt against modern industrialism was not based on a knowledge of economic relations or causes, nor did it result in overt action for social or political change. The bogey of industrialism induced a common pessimism in a whole section of the middle class and dominated a great part of its cultural expression. This opinion was critical of the distortions which industrialism imposed on American life and culture. It was appalled by the prevailing cynical disregard of human values, the ruthless grasping for material gain regardless of consequences and the unscrupulous plundering of natural resources. Burchfield in Salem experienced the effects of such an unprincipled and untrammeled industrial expansion at its worst, for the small towns had not even the cloak of culture which the concentration of wealth could provide in large cities. He was the first artist to depict this deformation—the poverty, the drabness, the spiritual narrowness, the lack of refinement, the complete absence of beauty, the pervading sense of defeat and decay.

It is not strange, then, that ruins, which during the thirties became a symbol of industrial disloca-
tion and economic depression as well as of war, were for Burchfield in the twenties the characteristic feature of the small town without hope for the future and with only a haunting past. Ruin became the flavor of life and decay hung over it like a pall. Burchfield charged industrialism, on the one hand, with having created these ruins of the past without, on the other, having produced anything but a scabrous shell of material existence which from its very inception seemed much like a ruin. The dry rot which was undermining town life spread through the countryside. Burchfield depicted in *Watering Time* (c. 1925) the disintegration of an agricultural era which had been built on the richness of the soil. The great barns which were once monuments to labor, fruitfulness, and stability are crumbling into dilapidation. In such pictures he was echoing the depression which struck agriculture after the war although throughout the twenties business was enjoying its great boom. The growth of monopoly in industry saw a comparable growth of larger units in agriculture, driving the small farmer into bankruptcy. Farms were deserted, machinery rusted, houses fell into decay, and the land lay idle, while those farmers who did survive were reduced to a submarginal existence. So in Burchfield's pictures the weeds grow higher and the wilderness begins to recover what it once lost to man's ingenuity and energy.

It cannot be denied that a good deal of this feeling for the ruin arises out of Burchfield's love of the picturesque and the romantic. He himself claims that as his sole interest. He also claims that after 1920 he was no longer holding small-town life up
to scorn and ridicule and that, in representing the architecture of the past, he was romanticizing the tag end of pioneer days. "If I presented them in all their garish and crude primitiveness and unlovely decay, it was merely through a desire to be honest about them." In some paintings, as in *House of Mystery* (1924), there was a return to his earlier romantic interest in the evocation of fear. But in most cases this romanticism was, as in *Winter Solstice* (1921), used to make more palpable the dreariness of a clapboard existence. As a realist, he made the life he knew his subject matter, as a romantic, he managed always to see a hidden spirit which animated that life. The black opaque windows of *Eating Place, East Salem, Ohio* (c. 1926) become the sightless eyes of a soul in torment. In *February Thaw* (1920), a row of stores and houses takes on the appearance of a gauntlet of fantastic monsters gaping and leering at the dismal world. But Burchfield’s picture of the midwest is an honest picture for all its romanticism, and far from a pretty one.

As Burchfield matured, his romanticism became less obvious and more subservient to his realism.

Charles Burchfield, *February Thaw*. In the Brooklyn Museum Collection
But the romantic ingredient gives his paintings an animation which Hopper's entirely lack. Burchfield's houses are personalities, his automobiles animals; there is a spiritual communication between animate and inanimate objects reminiscent of his earlier anthropomorphism. For instance, although Hopper and Burchfield both discovered false fronts and Victorian mansions as typically American subjects, their individual utilization of that material is very different. Hopper is interested in them as phenomena of American life. A row of false fronts or a Gothic house on a hill, because they are common to all small towns, become symbols of America. Burchfield never sees them with the same objectivity. To him they are places frequented by people, they are houses people live in, and in this contact with the human they have assumed something of the living.

In Burchfield's *Promenade* (1928) every object has a specific and personal character, yet each has affected the others, each personality even in its individuality is dependent upon the others. The tree in the center grew that way because it had such fantastic neighbors, the houses would not be as friendly without the tree, the little "flivver" is real only because it stands in front of the red house, the promenade itself is natural on such a street. This richness of relationship and humor is lacking in...
Hopper, whose Victorian buildings, like Haskell House (1924) or House by the Railroad (1925), are cold, aloof, isolated, interesting only as architectural mementoes. Burchfield with all his romanticism is a realist, and with all his critical attitude, warmly human.

During this period neither Hopper nor Burchfield was concerned with beauty in itself, Hopper through principle and Burchfield through instinct. Burchfield, more emotional, at times is impelled to create a mood of lyrical beauty; but when thus moved he will leave the realm of reality for that of sentimental romanticism, creating such symbolic landscapes as October (1924), which are failures simply because Burchfield, as a realist, cannot handle beauty in the abstract. That is why in both Burchfield and Hopper there are no isolated passages of beauty such as abound in the work of artists like Marin or Weber. In all of Burchfield's water colors there is no single brushstroke which can compare with the translucent brilliance of a Marin wash, in all of Hopper's work there is no patch of color to match the jewel-like richness of a Weber paint passage. This is no indictment of Burchfield and Hopper as artists; for to them technique is only the expressive means. The "degenerate legacy" of beautiful painting to all such artists is a frivolous intrusion upon a profound thought. The quality of their art depends upon the subordination of technique to the expression of the idea. When they become interested in beauty for its own end, they usually produce frightful "buckeyes." Although during the thirties many artists, motivated by similar social forces, were intrigued by the coincidence of the beautiful paint passage and the inherent ugliness of the scene, Burchfield and Hopper in the twenties rarely hedged on realism with side bets on beauty.