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John Howard Lawson's "1919" (c. 1964)

LeRoy Robinson

In John Howard Lawson's unfinished and unpublished autobiography, begun in 1964, when he was about 70 years old, there are three chapters with the tentative (?) titles. "The View from the Seine", "1919" and "Quai de la Tournelle". "The View from the Seine", apparently written first, covers the same period as that of "1919" and "Quai de la Tournelle",

The present article collates and summarizes these three chapters. Quotation marks are not used but Lawson's own language and, when possible, organization are closely followed.¹⁾

Among important American writers of the 20th century, John Howard Lawson remains comparatively unknown. Historians of the literature of the United States will find this summary useful in understanding Lawson's life and work more fully.

"1919"²⁾

In November 1919 John Howard Lawson sat in a handsome old-fashioned room in a rich old house on Fifteenth Street in Washington, D. C. He was speaking with his father-in-law, James A. Drain. A prominent Washington lawyer, Drain, a leading figure in the newly founded veterans' organization the American Legion (of which he was National Commander in 1924-25), was trying to get Lawson to join

1) Susan Amanda Lawson, John Howard Lawson's daughter, has permitted me to read two, sometimes three, versions of Lawson's unfinished chapters dealing with his life to the mid-1930s.

2) Lawson's "1919" obviously derives from 1919, the second novel in the U.S.A. trilogy by John Dos Passos, Lawson's friend from 1917 to about 1937.

the Legion.³⁾ There was no tension in their friendly conversation (his wife Kathryn's family had recently welcomed Lawson as a son and brother, and Lawson liked James Drain), but Drain was politely puzzled by Lawson's refusal to accept his invitation to join the Legion.

John Howard Lawson did not explain to his father-in-law his reasons for refusing to join the American Legion: like many young intellectuals of the time, Lawson was shocked by the contemporary situation in the United States. The year 1919 was the year of four million striking workers. Steel workers were on strike in 50 cities. In many places strikes were broken with the help of members of the American Legion. The day Lawson spoke with his father-in-law there was the Armistice Day tragedy in Seattle, Washington - - a raid on a meeting of the Industrial Workers of the World, the battle in which legionnaires were killed, the subsequent lynching of a member of the I. W. W.

Lawson, who had recently returned to the United States after serving in France and Italy in the Norton-Harjes and American Red Cross Ambulance Service, was faced with a dilemma. He was shocked by the social situation in the United States, but he was insulated from it, more insulated than he had been during the war, because now the battle field seemed further away, and he was in less danger of being involved. It was possible for Lawson to become involved, but there were obstacles and risks to involvement which he did not want to face. He was in opposition to the bourgeoisie, but he was unmistaka-

3) S. Stanwood Menken, the husband of Lawson's aunt (his mother's sister), was connected with the National Security League, a conservative patriotic organization.

bly a part of it. He was not so much a rebel as an embarrassed guest among his own people.

An early return to Europe was imperative.⁴⁾

Lawson and Kathryn had returned to the United States in the spring of 1919 because of their lack of money and the wishes of their families, even the pressures. Their son Alan Drain Lawson was born in New York in July; both families were delighted.

In New York, Simeon Levy Lawson, still Manager of Reuter's North American and Canadian News Service, "lent" his son John whatever money he needed. The Lawsons rented artist(Rockwell Kent's apartment in a brownstone house on 15th Street near Seventh Avenue, New York City. Kent, to whom mutual friends had introduced them, was glad to sublease to people he could trust. Lawson had never seen Kent's paintings, but now he enjoyed living with Kent's pictures of the Arctic, a reminder that Kent also shared Lawson's distaste for New York and had again escaped to the primitive life of the Far North.

John Howard Lawson had no desire to explore the Arctic, but New York seemed to offer him no creative stimulus. He could not work on Roger Bloomer, the play he had begun in France in 1917; he thought he needed the more congenial surroundings of Europe.

Lawson thought that there was no intellectual freedom in the United States. He saw no hope of improvement. The dead weight of convention was everywhere, but its effects were more psychological

4) In "The View from the Seine" Lawson says he and his wife fervently longed to return to Europe, not because conformity was imposed upon them But because they were almost "smothered" with comfort and kindness.

then social.⁵⁾

Lawson, who had advocated socialism when he was at Williams College, considered himself a rebel, but he took no active part in politics, and his sympathy with striking workers did not lead to any action on his part.

Then, on the night of January 2, 1920, the night of the "deportation delirium",⁶⁾ the social pressures became more severe. Under the direction of U. S. Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer and his assistant J. Edgar Hoover, federal police seized 10,000 people in 70 cities. Greenwich Village intellectuals were under suspicion. In their search for "undesirable aliens" police invaded many studios and homes. The Lawsons lived on the edge of the Village, and John Howard Lawson knew some of the people held for questioning by the police.

Lawson feared a long period of brutal regimentation had begun, but the shock of these events did not make him feel less insulated. He did not feel directly threatened. He was an observer, stirred by moral indignation that had no outlet. He felt that vital forces in American life were being stifled under a pall of conformity, but he felt helpless.

In order to avoid being stifled,⁷⁾ Lawson had to escape. In order to escape, he needed money. He had "borrowed" a great deal of money from his father, but he felt he could not ask his father to finance a trip to Europe of which Simeon Levy Lawson did not approve. (In

5) Lawson had already opposed some aspects of the "dead weight of convention" in *Standards* (1916, produced) and *The Mad Moon* (1917, unproduced).

6) Lawson does not identify the source of this quoted phrase.

7) Images of stifling appear in many Lawson plays, e. g., *Processional*, in which one character is stifled by an American flag thrown over his head.

"The View from the Seine" Lawson says his father was "hurt and bewildered" by Lawson's desire to leave the United States.)

The only way Lawson could get money quickly was to write something for the commercial stage. So he worked feverishly on old plays and new ones. Mary Kirkpatrick, his agent since 1915, still zealously negotiated on his behalf with Broadway producers.

Lawson's commercial efforts led him into a brief collaboration with James Oppenheim, who had published a series of of popular magazine fiction about a woman detective.

Lawson knew of Oppenheim's courageous anti-war stand in the *Seven Arts* magazine. Lawson knew that Oppenheim had let the *Seven Arts* die in 1917 rather than give up control of the magazine or alter his anti-way editorial policies. But not until the 1930s did Lawson learn that Oppenheim had written the song *Bread and Roses*, sung by women textile workers as they marched in the 1912 strike at Lawrence, Massachusetts And not until much later did Lawson read Oppenheim's 1911 novel *The Nine Tenths*, an account of the struggles of women garment workers in New York sweat shops, including a description of the Triangle Fire, and ending with the hope that New York would become "a city of five million comrades."

At the age of 70 or so, Lawson looked back at his meetings with Oppenheim: it seemed unbelievable to him that, when he was in his mid-20s, he had been so completely cut off from the political heritage that Oppenheim had helped to create. In 1920, Lawson says, Oppenheim himself was to a large extent cut off from that heritage.

The times were out of joint. The dream city of "five million comrades" no longer fired the imagination of the tired man who met Lawson for long breakfasts at the Brevoort Hotel. Oppenheim did not want to speak about the *Seven Arts*. The two men ate eggs Ben-

edict and sat for hours over coffee planning a play.⁸⁾

Then, in mid-January 1920, Mary Kirkpatrick sold one of John Howard Lawson's old unproduced plays *The Spice of Life* to Paramount Pictures for \$5,000.⁹⁾ Eager to escape from New York, Lawson telephoned Oppenheim to apologize for not continuing to work with him on their proposed play and bought tickets for a French Line steamship to Bordeaux.

Lawson's older sister Adelaide also wanted to escape - -from her father's possessive tenderness. Simeon Levy Lawson tried to understand and reluctantly agreed to permit Adelaide to go with Lawson and his wife for a short trip to Europe.

Lawson cabled Dos Passos and received a letter from Dos Passos: "We can collect in Barcelona or Marseilles. I hope to have finished my new novel, and to have a free mind and an untroubled heart."¹⁰⁾

8) In "1919" Lawson says that the outline of this play was never completed, but in the name of John Howard Lawson the Galbraith Welch Agency copyrighted a three-act play entitled "Humanlike" - - "Based on the Mrs. Polly stories by James Oppenheim". The Library of Congress copy of this play (D-41948) is 122 pages long and is a complete play not merely an outline. The Library of Congress copy is dated October 9, 1915, about five years before Lawson's meetings with Oppenheim; this dating seems to be erroneous. In "John Howard Lawson's 'Humanlike' (c. 1919)", *Keiei to keizai*, Vol. 60-3, No. 159, December 1980, I have provided literary historians with a detailed description of this play.

9) For a complete description of this play see "John Howard Lawson's Unpublished *The Spice of Life*, *Keiei to keizai*, Vol. 59-1, No. 153, July 1979.

10) In "The View from the Seine" Lawson refers to this message as a cable from Dos Passos, saying he would meet the Lawson party in Paris.

This letter meant a lot to Lawson, and he carried it in his pocket on shipboard. As he walked the ship's deck in the winter wind, Lawson pencilled on the back of it a possible line of dialogue for his play in progress *Roger Bloomer*: "I want to do something with my hands. . . day-laborer. . . I want to get down in the brown earth and dig."¹¹⁾ Lawson himself was not going to France to dig in the earth, and in expressing this "odd sentiment" he was only half-conscious of the contrast between his immediate desire to live an artist's life in Paris, an alien city, and his hunger for the earth.

On the voyage to Bordeaux, John Howard Lawson became ill. He was advised by the ship's doctor to go to Paris immediately for a medical examination.¹²⁾ Lawson insisted that his wife Kate and their baby son Alan and his sister Adelaide proceed to Barcelona to keep their rendezvous with Dos Passos.

Soon after arriving in Paris, Lawson received a note from Dos Passos, who had met Kate and Alan and Adelaide, but felt "rather desolated" at not meeting Lawson with them. Dos Passos said they would all pray for Lawson's health: "We must burn fat candles in chapels choking with incense."¹³⁾ Dos Passos said he was crazy to talk to Lawson and hoped to read him his new novel *Three Soldiers*. Two days later Lawson received a second letter from Dos Passos: "The whole caboodle. . . are going over to Mallorca tonight."

11) See my "John Howard Lawson's 1920 Draft of *Roger Bloomer*", *Keiei to keizai*, Vol. 60-2, No. 152, September 1980.

12) Lawson does not describe this illness, which required a "minor operation" which he does not identify.

13) Dos Passos may be jokingly referring to Lawson's pre-war theatrical tendency toward incense-filled settings.

Lawson says (in 1964) that this episode offers an insight into two aspects of his relationship with Dos Passos: Dos had never met Kate or Adelaide, but Dos and Lawson were so close and Dos Passos' need of emotional ties so great that he could accept Lawson's family as his own. But an occasion of this sort called for celebration, for some nervous activity, which for Dos Passos generally required travel. The journey to Mallorca covered Dos Passos' embarrassment and dissolved personal feeling in an adventure.

When Dos Passos reached Paris, Lawson read the manuscript of *Three Soldiers* with boundless enthusiasm. Lawson wrote to literary agent Karl Brandt that *Three Soldiers* was the first American novel to deal truthfully with the war and that it came close to greatness.¹⁴⁾

John Howard Lawson and Kate Drain Lawson intended to make Paris their permanent home. They chose Paris instead of Rome because the cultural events, especially the theatre, were far more alluring in Paris. They were as dependent on artistic happenings as Lawson had been as a child in New York.¹⁵⁾ But this was not the fullness of experience they were seeking.

They thought they had begun to find this fullness of experience at the small bistro of Madame Lecomte on the Ile St. Louis. Lawson and Kate had no desire to live on the Left Bank or in Montmartre. They were not interested in meeting the then still few American in-

14) The literary agency in which Lawson's agent Mary Kirkpatrick headed the dramatic department had changed its name and control from Galbraith Welch to Brandt and Kirkpatrick.

15) See my "John Howard Lawson: Childhood", *Bulletin of Faculty of Liberal Arts, Humanities*, Vol. 19, January 1979.

tellelectuals in Paris. Lawson and Kate wanted to live among working people, wanted to know them and to be accepted by them. They thought they had taken their first small step in the direction of the fullness of experience they were seeking when they met Madame Lecomte,¹⁶⁾ whose bistro on the Quai de la Tournelle catered to men from the river boats and workers living in that neighborhood. The bistro, called "rendezvous des mariniers", later became a showplace attracting many Americans, but in 1920 it was unspoiled.

Madame Lecomte, married and with two children, ran the business, cooked magnificently, superintended the bar, assisted by her husband (a "nonentity"); her two children were polite and "decorative". As Lawson puts it in 1964, nothing could diminish Madame Lecomte's grace. Her personality delighted and intrigued Lawson and Kate; Madame Lecomte was "more French" than anyone they had known. She was thrifty, watching the pennies. She puzzled the Lawsons by maintaining an aloof dignity with warmth and wit. At first Madame Lecomte was puzzled by the Lawsons, too, but she slowly came to accept them as friends and treated them with bantering affection as if they were members of her own family.¹⁷⁾ She kept a reserve that Lawson and Kate could not overcome. She was closer to Kate than to Lawson. Her strongest affection was for Dos Passos.¹⁸⁾

16) In "The View from the Seine" Lawson says Dos Passos had "discovered" Madame Lecomte.

17) On the other hand, she never introduced the Lawsons to her own friends.

18) In "A View from the Seine" Lawson suggests possibly because Dos Passos came and went, while Lawson and Kate were consistently present. Lawson adds that he cannot guess how much Madame Lecomte's kindness was affected by the fact that he and Kate were profitable customers for her.

Madame Lecomte helped the Lawsons to find an apartment at 45 Quai de la Tournelle, where they lived for almost two years, Madame Lecomte was their "only human link with the Parisian way of life." This flat, exactly what they wanted, was up six steep flights of worn stone steps; and had two tiny rooms with sloping ceilings which made it impossible to stand erect except in the center of each room. There was a small stove and a sink with cold running water. The toilet, far from sanitary, was in the hall. From the windows, recessed in the mansard roof, the Lawsons could watch the barge traffic on the Seine and see, across the river, the tangled expanse of old buildings and church towers in the oldest part of Paris.

When Lawson and Kate completed the complicated legal requirements and moved into the flat, they felt they had become Parisians. It was early spring.

Lawson set out to work, writing with an energy and confidence he had not known before. He looked back upon his previous work as an apprenticeship under galling restraints.¹⁹⁾ The Quai de la Tournelle was the starting point of his creative effort, and all the values and limitations of his commitment to the theatre were projected in that two-year period.

On July 30, 1920, Lawson finished a draft of Roger Bloomer. He immediately began Processional.²⁰⁾

19) See my "John Howard Lawson's Introduction to Broadway", *Kyushu American Literature*, No. 20, June 1979.

20) See my "John Howard Lawson's First Draft of Processional", *Keiei to keizai*, Vol. 60-1, No. 157, July 1980, and "John Howard Lawson's Second Draft of Processional 1921", *Bulletin of Faculty of Liberal Arts, Humanities*, Vol. 21, No. 1, August 1980.

Lawson was inspired to write *Processional* by newspaper accounts of a Mingo County, West Virginia, coal miners' strike that erupted in violence. A police chief was killed. A pitched battle was fought in which a town's mayor, two miners and several private detectives lost their lives. As Lawson worked on *Processional* he read more reports of further violence in Mingo County. In the warfare between strikers (including native born American whites and blacks and Italian and Polish immigrants) and guards, six more men were killed. U. S. Federal troops entered the area.

These events provided the basis for the first act of *Processional*, which begins on a July 4th morning in a strife-torn West Virginia town. The strike gave Lawson the setting for a ritual of primitive fury: the proud mountain people were projected into an alliance with black and foreign workers.

But there was an element in the first version of *Processional* that did not appear in the final one. In the first version the main character was a younger, idealized Madame Lecomte - - in Lawson's original conception, Felicite, a French woman married to an American soldier from West Virginia, represented an old-world wisdom, a patient and mocking sense of life which counterpointed the raw intensity of the Americans. Felicite was central to Lawson's first approach to the play: her response to the raw violence and the moral confusion of the Americans was designed to provide a comment on the action. Lawson intended to build the climax of *Processional* around Felicite's tragic inability to cope with life in West Virginia and her realization at the moment of her death that the American situation embodied a new, more vibrant life.

In "Quai de la Tournelle" Lawson says there was something false in his 1920 concept of Felicite that made it impossible for him

to write words for her to speak.²¹⁾ The deep trouble lay in Lawson's attempt to bring his feeling about Europe into the play. What he felt about West Virginia was valid in personal terms - - it was what his country meant to him, and his feeling cried for expression. But what he felt about Europe was self-deception.

In September 1920, after having written a 74-page first act of *Proeessional*, Lawson was on the verge of emotional collapse. Everything was wrong - - with the play, with him, with his marriage, with his life in Paris. Travel was the only panacea. Lawson travelled alone to Rome.²²⁾ He walked the night streets. He returned to familiar by-ways. He re-visited ruins, old temples and churches. But the stones were dead. The magic was gone.

Lawson had had a few friends in Rome. Young poets and theatre people, furiously dedicated to Futurism, they had in 1918 taken Lawson to see a semi-professional performance of short futurist plays.

In one of these plays, *Passatismo*, by Bruno Corra and Emilio Settimelli, the entire action, repeated in each of the three acts, consisted of dialogue between an old man and an old woman, sitting at a table: "How do you feel ? . . . I am content . . . Have you eaten well ? . . ." "I have eaten well and digested well. How contented I am !, . . ." At the end of the play, each says: "Oh,

21) The character of Felicite "haunted" Lawson for years. In 1930, at the beginning of the depression, he tried to bring Felicite into a community of rebellious Middle Western farmers in Saga Center. Again she destroyed the play, which was left unfinished after the first act.

22) Dos Passos had already left Paris for New York, first spending several weeks in Spain, then going to Cuba.

God, my head hurts." Both die.²³⁾

In 1918 these friends had given Lawson *Il Teatro Futurista Sintetico*, in which Marinetti's famous 1915 Manifesto declared that in writing drama it was stupid to care about verisimilitude and stupid to submit to the demands of climax, and proposed to abolish the technique under which the traditional theatre was dying.

In 1918 Lawson had been "piqued" by the enthusiasm of his friends in Rome, but he was troubled by the brevity and aridity of their plays. In 1920 he wanted to find out what these friends had accomplished. They welcomed him with excited talk about Mussolini's *fascio di combattimento*, the wave of the future, the expression of futurism in political action.

Lawson was dazed by the change in his friends. He had met artists who were stupid or conformist. But his friends' violence in defense of conformity was new to him.²⁴⁾ He was frightened by it. There was no one with whom he could share his fears. He felt he had to get away from Rome.

In Naples he walked through art galleries and poverty-stricken streets. He saw the poverty in Italy clearly for the first time - during the war he had ignored it. As he traveled to Sicily, the poverty became worse; the slums of Palermo nauseated him. He hurried north, to Bologna, Venice, Trieste. He hurried across Yugoslavia to Vienna.

Lawson spent three desolate weeks in Vienna. He tried to see Freud, who was attending an International Psychoanalytical Congress

23) Lawson notes that *Passatismo* is included in *Il Teatro Futurista Sintetico*, Istituto Editoriale Italiano, Milan, 1915, by Marinetti, Settimelli and Corra.

24) Lawson adds: "In its peculiar modern form it was new to the world."

at the Hague.²⁵⁾ Lawson walked through mile after mile of working class districts. He stood above the Blue Danube, trying to find some clue to his misery in its yellow waters.

Lawson found plenty of culture in Vienna - - historic buildings, museums, operas. But all this seemed to duplicate Lawson's first rapid tour of England in 1906, and he did not seem to have progressed much from the child of twelve putting down each day's observations in a diary.

The only entertainment in Vienna that interested Lawson was presented in a small art theatre, where he saw three one-act plays, examples of post-war Middle European expressionism - - erotic, grotesque, pessimistic.²⁶⁾ He had seen this technique before; but, because of his recent experience with the Futurists, he wondered whether in those three plays there were some hidden traps, some threat that he could not define. Yet the viewpoint of the plays was close to his own. His feeling that life was miserable and grotesque was reinforced.²⁷⁾

In Vienna Lawson plunged into the only "real life" that he knew: night-town in Vienna was like night-town in any large city, except that it was more expensive, hysterical, and somber. Men were likely to be dangerous. Women clawed at men, pleading wildly for money.

25) Lawson, in his early 20s, was one of the first American playwrights to employ Freudian themes. See my "John Howard Lawson's Souls (1915)", *Keiei to keizai*, Vol. 59-2, No. 154, September 1979.

26) Lawson does not identify these plays.

27) Lawson adds: "The avant garde plays were unsatisfactory because they seemed so remote from the savage reality of the streets."

Lawson fled back to Paris. When his train came into the station, he saw his wife Kate on the platform with their son Alan in her arms. Lawson felt as if he had returned from perilous voyages. He says that perhaps the peril was that nothing had happened.

In Paris Lawson had letters from Dos Passos in New York, to which Dos Passos had "floated up from Cuba on the Gulf Stream on a very dilapidated boat." Dos Passos found New York rather funny, "like a badly drawn cartoon." "Everybody looks and dresses like the Arrow Collar man."

At this point in "Quai de la Tournelle" Lawson says:

In 1920 both he and Dos Passos were ambitious; both needed recognition as writers, but both hated the dominant culture from which that recognition had to come. Dos Passos' *One Man's Initiation* was being published in London, but more important would be American publication of *Three Soldiers*. Dos Passos concealed his emotion by extravagant mockery of his negotiations with publishers: "The Brandts have carried on a rather obscure intrigue with the Knopf gang, which to my relief collapsed. . ." But another publisher was interested in an earlier novel, *Seven Times Round the Walls of Jericho*. In his next letter Dos Passos wrote of that publisher that he dropped *Jericho* like a hot potato. "Everything is belly-up." Across the top of the last page of this letter Dos Passos wrote: "Belly up . . . Belly up. . . Belly up. . ." Under this he inked in large block letters: "New York continues to amuse."

Lawson found these letters from Dos Passos unsettling. He was not surprised at the raw edge of anger. But it was too close for comfort to his own mood after his return to Paris. Dos Passos' report from New York proved the Lawsons were lucky to be in Europe. But if things were "belly up" in the U. S. A. as well as in Europe, where was an artist to find the stuff of life ?

Both Roger Bloomer and Processional were about the United States. Both needed work. It was absurd to look for inspiration for "these tasks" in the slums or nightclubs of foreign cities. Lawson had ranged Europe in search of relaxation or a fresh point of view, but had found neither.

But, Lawson says, thinking is a painful process. The mind tends to dilute pain by diluting thought, spreading it out over long periods of miscellaneous experience.

Lawson and Kate were not unhappy in Paris, he says at one point in seeming contradiction to what he has said at another point. Their time in Paris was the most stable and calmest period of their marriage. They wandered about the city. They danced in small taverns and in the streets. They dined well and picturesquely. They had a small circle of friends, Americans.

What Lawson learned in Paris, from arguments and dissipations, was not very different from what he could have learned in Greenwich Village. He was influenced mainly by reading and by the theatre. He read Freud. He learned about the aesthetic controversies going on in Paris. The Nihilism of Dada appealed to him. He sided with the Dadaists against the Cubists.

Lawson considered Picasso's setting for the Russian Ballet's Parade an extravagant portrayal of a Parisian street scene, as far from conventional theatre as Cocteau's dance-drama with its music hall characters and grotesque movements.

Lawson rejected conventional theatre, but he could not imagine the revolutionary form which would revitalize the drama. He found hints of that form - - a moment of vaudeville, a political song in a cabaret, an aria in an opera, Chaplin's pantomime, the sweep of history in *Intolerance*.

Lawson knew only what he saw and heard in Paris. He felt that his outlook was too constricted, the paucity of his private experience ridiculously inadequate. But he knew of no way to enlarge his knowledge. No act of liberation, however bold or mad, would make him into another person.

Anyway, in Paris he enriched his understanding of theatre. Two events were decisive - - Lenormand's *Les Ratés* (performed by Georges Pitoeff and his wife) and Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* (performed by the Russian Ballet). These two performances were wholly different, but Lawson's later impressions of them were inter-related, for from the two he "molded" a rough style that seemed to promise a new kind of dramatic excitement or revelation.

In the work of Wedekind and Kaiser, Lawson had felt a coldness and artificiality. He could not identify with the embezzling bank clerk in *From Morn to Midnight*, But in *Les Ratés* the suffering of the playwright and his actress wife were so real to Lawson that he wept with them.²⁸⁾

Lawson did not envision his own Roger Bloomer as a play in which the city dazzles and overwhelms the young man. Lawson wanted to find situations which explored Roger's consciousness and showed his growth to manhood. *Les Ratés* suggested a method of developing psychological values, but Lawson could not give the character Roger this depth of experience, because he did not have it in himself. He was too much like the frustrated and self-pitying playwright in *Les*

28) In "The View from the Seine" Lawson comments: "*Les Ratés* has a sentimentality which is characteristic of the French theatre; it combines expressionistic techniques with a psychological intimacy, a passion that is touching and somewhat old-fashioned. It is half-way between *La Dame aux Camélias* and *Endgame*."

Ratés.

Lawson says in 1964 that the only modern work which attained the emotional splendor of total theatre was *Le Sacre*.²⁹⁾ *Le Sacre* affected Lawson more deeply than any other drama he had ever witnessed, and it had a direct effect on his style as a playwright.

Lawson says *Le Sacre* had this effect upon him because it was not theatre in the ordinary sense. *Le Sacre* combined music, dance, pantomime and visual effects: it rose to climactic fury in the strident rhythm and wild ritual of the blood sacrifice in which the young girl danced to her death to expiate the blood-guilt of the tribe and assure the harvest.

It seemed to Lawson that Stravinsky had had an artist's foreknowledge of the coming war in creating this ritual of blood and violence in 1913. In Paris, Lawson then believed that Stravinsky and Freud (who, in 1913, had written *Totem and Taboo*) revealed primitive impulses repeated in the psyche of each person. Lawson also studied Frazer's *Golden Bough* and found himself in a mythic world like a labyrinth of strange possibilities.

Lawson's first attempt to realize these strange possibilities was the Freudian nightmare near the end of *Roger Bloomer*. The ceremony around the body of the dead Louise was Lawson's attempt to reinterpret in modern terms the *Danse Sacrale* of *Le Sacre*. Roger's nightmare was subjective, but it related to history and to Lawson's understanding of the submerged passions that stirred under the surface of American life.

In August 1920, Lawson, having completed a rough draft of *Roger Bloomer*, proceeded with *Processional*, a play which was an

29) Arbitrary notions of what constitutes a play exclude Stravinsky's ballet.

American dream in terms of the frantic and desperate realities of the American situation - - labor strife, explosive violence, sexual repression and explosive sexual fulfillment, a climactic movement of pantomime and dance and sudden melodrama, absurdity and pathos. In *Processional* the derivation from *Le Sacre* was the rape of the child-woman, her descent into the dark mine and her ritual transformation.

The bold scheme of *Processional* was, in Lawson's mind, complete in abstract outline; but he was not able to bring it to the surface or crystallize its sound and fury in action on the stage. In neither *Roger Bloomer* nor *Processional* could Lawson create a plot structure which gave characters an organic place in the social situation. Lawson did not know what he wanted to say about the American background's effects on his specific characters. Those characters were energetic puppets, but they did not suffer and live.

In both plays Lawson tried to develop an older woman foil to a young girl, the somewhat older person representing emotional adjustment or sublimation of the primal instincts driving the other characters.

In *Roger Bloomer* Roger falls in love with Janet, a Greenwich Village artist, an intensely emotional woman, who is in part responsible for the young girl's suicide. Janet carried the obscure meaning of the first versions of the play: "Sophisticated people talk a great deal to conceal their fear of life; they give their fear a name and call it beauty ! Oh, no. Beauty is out on the dusty roads, beauty is grimy in the coal pits." Janet was a false or unrealized character, and Lawson withdrew her from later versions of *Roger Bloomer*, as he then withdrew *Felicite* from later versions of *Processional*.

Lawson, at 70 years of age, can not say why these two inadequate characters represented something so essential to him that he

could not cut them free from his manuscripts without feeling that he was drawing blood. They "haunted" him. They "refused to die." (Janet re-appeared in *Nirvana* (1926) and re-emerged, greatly changed, but still speaking some of the same phrases, in *Gentlewoman* (1934)). In 1920 the woman as life force or interpreter was an idealized figure to whom Lawson could not give any semblance of life.

A more realistic opposition between an older woman and a younger one recurred in the later *Processional*, *Nirvana*, *The Pure in Heart* (1934), *Gentlewoman* and *Marching Song* (1937). Lawson says that he has no "explication" of this continuing pattern. He doubts that any "glib analysis" could get to the root of the problem. He says that this pattern may go back to his childhood and the loss of his mother when he was seven years old.

Lawson says the tangle of feelings surrounding the two 1920 plays was intensely personal. He could not solve the plays because he could not tolerate the limitation of his daily life. He blamed the trouble on his marriage, which he says was unfair to his wife Kate. She agreed he could do what he pleased. But he did not know what he pleased. Everything he hated in the routine of living was connected with marriage. He did not want to break away. His protest was absurd. He was indignant because the ties that bound him were so strong. There were comforts and compensations. There was love. There was a child. The answer for Lawson was travel. (See pages 13, 14 and 15).

Back in Paris, John Howard Lawson had a conviction that there was something wrong with the literary life, that it looked back to the past rather than ahead to the future. His conviction was strengthened by two intellectuals whom he respected, Ezra Pound and Edna St. Vincent Millay.

Ezra Pound visited the Lawsons a few times and marched around their apartment, bumping his head on the sloping ceiling, talking about T. S. Eliot and James Joyce and *Noh Plays*. This talk was exciting to Lawson but sometimes difficult for him to understand. Lawson shared Pound's bitterness about the United States, but he questioned Pound's contempt for the "mob" and their degraded taste. Pound was both sure of himself and unsure, Lawson says, like a Delphic Oracle that has lost its sacred credit and goes on prophecying, convinced of its wisdom and sure that no one is listening. Lawson was listening and began to reconsider T. S. Eliot's work and Pound's (and Hulmes') and was refreshed by their poetry and their theories of art. But, when Lawson told Pound about the cartoon style he envisioned for *Processional*, Pound called that a cheap use of shoddy material.

The Lawsons were closer to Edna Millay, who, on the verge of a nervous breakdown, had come to Europe. In Greenwich Village she had been a symbol of freedom, but that had never been natural to her. In Paris, she had a comfortable liason with a man who made no serious emotional demands on her. Lawson and Millay argued for months, in quiet restaurants near the Boulevard St. Michel, over her *Aria da Capo*, which Lawson had seen in New York. Lawson had found everything done by the Provincetown Players artificial, arty, except O'Neill's early sea plays. Lawson asked Millay why her anti-war theme in *Aria da Capo* was devitalized by a sentimental use of *Commedia dell' Arte*, Pierrot in lavender, Columbine in pink. Millay was disturbed by Lawson's question, but she saw no sense in his demand that dramatists create new forms to express the chaos and the cruelty, the harsh conflicts, the broken rhythms, of the modern world. Millay hated harshness and could not tolerate broken forms or broken

rhythms.

In 1920-21, Lawson thought that both Pound and Millay, in their different sensibilities (Pound rejected the romantic humanist tradition, which was the bread of life to Millay), refused to confront contemporary stress and strain, turning back to imaginary security and beauty. Lawson says that Millay came closest to immortality in a few sonnets which achieved the clarity and order essential to her, but she escaped the full impact of contemporary experience by holding to traditional forms, and that Pound made a more desperate retreat, to Italy and the Quattrocento.

In 1921 the Lawsons' money was running out, so he took a job working at home on stories and photographic records for the Paris publicity office of the American Red Cross. This short-lived job ended in a row between Lawson and the head of the department, who refused to pay Lawson the sum of money agreed upon.

Lawson decided he had to be alone to complete *Processional*. He went to Le Havre. A few miles north of the town, he got a room in a house on a cliff above the sea. He was served breakfast and lunch in a grape arbor. He worked on *Processional* until late afternoon, then took the streetcar to Le Havre, and spent the evenings in sailors' honkytonkys.

In October 1921 *Processional* was roughly completed, and the Lawsons returned to New York to find out if either *Roger Bloomer* or *Processional* or both could be produced. The postwar period in Paris had been necessary for Lawson, a hiatus giving him a chance to work and think. Paris was part of his illusion. He killed it forever.

In 1964, Lawson notes that in *A Moveable Feast* Hemingway, whose Paris period began after Lawson left, wrote "there is never any ending to Paris" and said with nostalgia and a touch of *La Vie*

de Boheme. "this is how Paris was in the early days when we were very poor and very happy." Lawson say "no" to this. He found no feast of the spirit in Paris. He cannot suppose that Heminway's impression was of how it truly was for Hemingway or for others. There was a definite ending to Paris for all of them, and for most of them the ending was salutary. The end was cruel for Hemingway because he tried to continue his moveable feast in many other places. "We were never really in Paris," Lawson concludes. "We were in Night Town, which is much the same everywhere, and is not a gracious or kindly place."³⁰⁾

30) Lawson finds it sad that Hemingway's memories, despite their sentiment, are so lacking in grace and kindness.