

ERNEST POOLE

# The Harbor

*Introduction and Notes by*  
PATRICK CHURA

PENGUIN BOOKS



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## THE HARBOR

ERNEST POOLE was born in 1880 in Chicago, where he grew up in a politically progressive middle-class family. After graduating from Princeton in 1902 he set out to become a writer, working initially as a muckraking journalist in New York City. In 1905 he traveled to Russia for *Outlook* magazine to report on the aftermath of a failed anticzarist uprising and investigate European socialism firsthand. Over the next decade he wrote numerous short stories, an undistinguished first novel, and a dozen plays, three of which were produced. Poole's greatest success came in 1915 with the publication of *The Harbor*, a bestselling and controversial socialist novel that described the political conversion of a middle-class young man to active sympathy with the labor movement during a violent waterfront strike. After *The Harbor* made him famous, Poole's literary reputation reached its peak when his next novel, *His Family*, won the first-ever Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1918, an award that some saw as belated recognition for *The Harbor*. Poole published several moderately successful novels in the 1920s, but his work gradually fell out of favor with critics. During the Depression he largely gave up fiction to write class-conscious journalism about economic conditions in the United States and Europe. His autobiography, *The Bridge*, appeared in 1940. He died in 1950 having published twenty-four books, including fiction, history, and reform-oriented journalism.

PATRICK CHURA is associate professor of English at the University of Akron, where he teaches courses in American literature. He is the author of two books—*Vital Contact* in 2005 and *Thoreau the Land Surveyor* in 2010—and has published articles on a variety of literary-historical topics. He is a former Peace Corps volunteer and Fulbright lecturer in the Republic of Lithuania, and has received research grants from the European Union, the Fulbright Foundation, and the University of Akron.

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To M.A.

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# Introduction

Critics from several eras have described *The Harbor* as “the best Socialist novel of all,” the “best radical novel written in the 1910s,” and “the best fictional account of the Paterson strike by a participant.”<sup>1</sup> Like a number of muckraking classics, the book both recorded history and made history. It was the highly controversial eighth bestseller of 1915, going through seventy-eight thousand copies and twenty-two printings in a matter of months. The *New York Times* reviewer called it “the best American novel that has appeared in many a long day” and added, “It is difficult to give more than the faintest hint of the scope and power of this very unusual book within the limits of a review. Here in this vision of the harbor is focused much of our modern world.”<sup>2</sup> After *The Harbor* made him famous, Ernest Poole’s career reached its zenith when his next novel, *His Family*, won the first-ever Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1918, an award that some saw as belated recognition for Poole’s more celebrated earlier book.<sup>3</sup> *The Harbor* had a strong influence on the generation of radicals and progressives that came of age during World War I, and its significance was not lost on major writers with leftist leanings, including John Dos Passos, Upton Sinclair, and Eugene O’Neill.

For the class-conscious writer of the early 1910s, evidence was all around the United States that the labor-capital conflict was reaching a critical stage. In 1912, Socialist candidate Eugene V. Debs won over nine hundred thousand votes for president, and a successful textile workers’ strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, brought “Big Bill” Haywood and his labor organization, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), to their peak of influence and power. Dues-paying membership in the Socialist Party reached an all-time high of 120,000. Nationwide, at least 435 socialists held public office, including 21 state legislators and the mayor of Milwaukee.<sup>4</sup> Beginning in 1913, a long, ugly coal strike in the Trinidad-Ludlow area of southern Colorado drew public attention to appalling conditions in the western mines. Headlines in the national press described increasingly violent attempts of industrial “combinations” to break strikes and destroy unions—along with the increasing political effectiveness of the labor movement itself. What newspaper editors referred to with interest and trepidation as “The Rising Tide of Socialism” was a real phenomenon. At no previous time in U.S. history did a turn toward a collectivist economic future seem quite so possible.

The year 1913 is often cited as a watershed in both labor history and art history, a moment in which the contradictions of capitalism determined multiple aesthetic forms and filtered into popular culture. In February, the epoch-making New York Armory Show ushered in modernism in the visual and plastic arts, and in June, a silk workers’ strike in Paterson, New Jersey, brought Greenwich Village intellectuals and the working class together to create the spectacular Paterson Strike Pageant, an unprecedented example of revolutionary élan that is now understood as a turning point in the evolution of public art and radical self-consciousness.<sup>5</sup> “Looking back on it now,” wrote the millionaire labor sympathizer Mabel Dodge Luhan, “it seems as though everywhere, in that year of 1913, barriers went down and people reached each other who had never been in touch before; there were all sorts of new ways to communicate, as well as new communications.”<sup>6</sup>

Among the most admired and evocative new communications in this period was Poole’s *The Harbor*, a culturally revealing, politically embedded novel that Poole began writing in 1912, completed in 1914, and published in the spring of 1915 to instant acclaim. The making of *The Harbo*

was directly influenced by concurrent events, some of which are now forgotten. Poole's initial impulse for a story about the rise of labor came from the Lawrence strike. The fierce political tensions he described were the product of his contact with Bill Haywood and IWW organizers. The author gained further impetus, along with fresh insights about the class system, from his direct participation in the Paterson strike and Paterson pageant. The Colorado coal strikes added material that heightened the violence and shock value of the book's main labor action.

Finally, in a direct convergence of literature and world events, the novel's conclusion was shaped by the outbreak of World War I. When *The Harbor* was accepted by the Macmillan Company in early 1914, Poole believed the book finished, but after European hostilities broke out in July of that year, he asked the publisher to return the manuscript and then spent a month rewriting the final chapters. As he explained in his autobiography, *The Bridge*, the new ending incorporated the onset of the Great War by "showing the whole world in chaos."<sup>7</sup>

Though Poole's success came suddenly, it had a long foreground in the study of serious social issues. Born in 1880 into a securely middle-class Chicago family, he probably imbibed his interest in reform movements from his mother, Mary Howe Poole, who taught tolerance and generosity toward the underprivileged as an extension of her Christian ethics. In *The Bridge*, the author recalled childhood friendships with indigent boys who played in the city dumps, experiences he would recycle as part of his main character's background in *The Harbor*. Poole's reformist sympathies were further inspired in his teenage years by reading Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives*. From 1898 to 1902 he attended Princeton, where he was a mediocre student during his first two years. By the time he graduated he was ranked in the top quarter of his class and had earned As from Woodrow Wilson in history and political science.

Influenced by his study of Tolstoy, Turgenev, Balzac, and Kipling, Poole set out to become a fiction writer after graduation. Like many well-educated children of middle-class political progressives at the turn of the century, he chose a settlement house in the slums as a setting for his research into the lives of the poor. As he explained in *The Bridge*, "Tenement life appealed to me as a tremendous new field scarcely touched by American writers as yet."<sup>8</sup> In September 1902 Poole took up residence at the University Settlement house on New York's Lower East Side. His arrival coincided with the rise of social exposé literature—what was later known as muckraking journalism for its focus on urban squalor and the victims of poverty. His first writing project was a report on child labor that appeared in the April 1903 *McClure's* under the title "Waifs of the Street."

While living in University Settlement off and on from 1902 to early 1905, Poole wrote dozens of articles and pamphlets about slum perils ranging from rampant tuberculosis to venereal disease. In 1904 he returned to Chicago for six weeks to research a packinghouse strike. He lived in a tenement near the stockyards and produced articles that Upton Sinclair later drew from in writing *The Jungle*. Poole's memoir describes meeting Sinclair while *The Jungle* was in progress and giving his fellow muckraker "the inside dope on conditions in the Yards," along with "some tips on where to get more." On the same trip, Poole visited Jane Addams at Hull House and enlisted her aid in raising money for starving strikers.<sup>9</sup>

A year later Poole traveled to Russia, Georgia, and Ukraine for *Outlook* magazine to investigate the aftermath of the failed socialist uprising of January 1905, making him one of the earliest American writers to study European socialism firsthand. He interviewed party leaders in St. Petersburg and Moscow before venturing into the rural villages, where he lived with peasant families and recorded

their stories of recent czarist atrocities. The vivid and perceptive local descriptions Poole produced on this assignment are often considered his best journalism. During a stopover in London on the way home, the young author traded political insights and discussed socialist theory with George Bernard Shaw.

In the years between his Russian trip and the writing of *The Harbor* Poole pursued a literary career in New York, selling an occasional work of fiction to *The Saturday Evening Post* and publishing more articles on slum conditions that won the praise of Theodore Roosevelt. Friends and influences in this phase of apprenticeship included liberal journalist Lincoln Steffens, immigrant newspaper editor Abraham Cahan, and writer-activist Mary Heaton Vorse. Before he turned thirty Poole had written a somewhat amateurish first novel, sold a handful of stories, and written perhaps a dozen full-length plays, three of which had been produced. In October 1908, impressed by the political success of moderate socialist leader and state congressional candidate Morris Hillquit, Poole joined the Socialist Party and began contributing regular articles to New York's socialist organ, the *Call*.

When Big Bill Haywood's aggressive labor organization, the Industrial Workers of the World, came east from Colorado in 1912 to take the lead in a major strike in the textile mills of Lowell and Lawrence, Poole naturally became involved. He organized a well-attended mass meeting in New York's Carnegie Hall to raise funds for the jailed Italian strike leaders Joseph Ettor and Arturo Giovannitti. Poole not only followed the strike closely, in the process learning valuable political lessons; he played a tangential role in the IWW's greatest victory, an event then widely viewed as the first battle in the coming class war. The Lawrence strike opened up the eastern states to agitation through the preaching and practice of the controversial IWW doctrine of "direct action." By all accounts it was this strike that prompted Poole to begin the novel he had been contemplating for years—a work that would transmit to a wide audience the dynamic of a radical labor conflict and offer a vision of a world run by workers.

But *The Harbor* could not have taken final shape without the stimulus of the silk workers' strike in Paterson, New Jersey, that began in February 1913. During this strike, Ernest Poole came to Paterson more than any other prominent Socialist and took more away with him. He often accompanied Bill Haywood and feminist labor leader Elizabeth Gurley Flynn to Turn Hall in New York, where strike rallies were held, and gave speeches to the workers at the weekly Sunday striker gatherings at the New Jersey town of Haledon. Poole was also deeply involved in the Paterson Strike Pageant, a moving reenactment of the events of the strike before an audience of twenty thousand in Madison Square Garden. This groundbreaking performance used several hundred real strikers as actors portraying themselves in dramatized scenes from the Paterson conflict, including the initial walkout, picket line at the mills, mass meetings and speeches by Haywood, police violence, the funeral of a murdered striker, and the singing of the *Internationale* as a finale. Working with future Communist revolutionary John Reed and set designer Robert Edmond Jones, Poole drew on his stage experience to help plan the logistics of the production. In newspaper accounts on the morning after the pageant, he was named as one of the "bright lights who worked up the show" and one of the four writers of the pageant script.<sup>10</sup>

Over the years, pageant witnesses, participants, and historians have outdone themselves in their attempts to adequately extol the emotive power of the event. Flynn called the pageant "the most beautiful and realistic example of art that has been put on stage in the last half century." Upton Sinclair, who advertised his latest novel in the event program, was moved to tears by the show, which he avowed "would never pass from [his] memory." Theater scholars now generally agree that the pageant sparked the development of American drama, preparing the way for the labor plays of the

Provincetown Players.<sup>11</sup> A number of the founding members of the players—including George Cram Cook, Susan Glaspell, and John Reed—were involved in or present at the pageant. Cook referred to it as “the first labor play” and praised the “feeling of oneness” with the strikers that Poole and the other pageant organizers had conveyed.<sup>12</sup>

Ultimately, perhaps, nothing better expresses the event’s power than an artifact that actually predated it—Robert Edmond Jones’s compelling publicity illustration, which doubled as the cover of the pageant program and now serves as the cover of this book. In Jones’s sketch, an intent, confident young worker emerges from the factory, surging upward under a boldly emblazoned “I.W.W.” as if in answer to the organization’s call to action. This image—championing anticapitalist revolution and forcefully asserting the rising might of the working class—has become the strike’s chief symbol and an icon of labor history.

While Jones and the Provincetowners expressed their feeling of “oneness” with workers through visual art and drama, Poole found a way to put this sentiment into fiction. One evening during the Paterson strike, while Haywood was having dinner at Poole’s home in New York, the Wobbly leader mentioned that he planned “to strike New York Harbor and shut it up tight” the following spring. When Poole replied that he knew of this plan and had learned of it from a young IWW organizer he’d been interviewing on the waterfront, the surprised Haywood asked the purpose of his research. “I’m writing a book called *The Harbor*,” Poole replied.<sup>13</sup>

The book Poole alluded to, a largely forgotten landmark in American literary history, offers a detailed treatment of economic and social conditions in New York from the 1880s to the outbreak of the Great War. While Poole’s novel spans decades, one of its chief merits is that it preserves in literary form a brilliant but short-lived episode in the history of the radical labor movement. In book III of *The Harbor*, when a militant organizer leads the middle-class main character into the hold of an ocean liner to view the working conditions of stevedores and stokers and declares, “[T]hey’re waking up fast—all over the world,” he is putting on display the kind of energy captured visually by Jones and harnessed in the Lawrence and Paterson strikes. This energy, glimpsed by Poole at Paterson, is reconstituted in the closing chapters of his novel when the “great spirit of the crowd” is born in a violent dockworkers’ action.

Fittingly, the basic tension in Poole’s representation of the prewar national mood involves the question of political conversion to socialism. The novel’s protagonist, Billy (he is not given a surname), is an aspiring writer who struggles to reconcile his sympathy for oppressed workers with his middle-class loyalties and basic faith in capitalist progress. The other central characters in the novel—Dillon and Joe Kramer—are aligned on opposite sides of the class war, with Billy in a complicated position between them. Dillon, an acclaimed engineer, city planner, and “priest of big business,” urges Billy to use his literary talents to write politically conservative “glory stories,” thinly disguised paeans to the “great men” at the top of the industrial system. Kramer, a radical activist whose character is based on the organizer Poole met at Paterson, renounces his ties to the respectable classes to go among slum dwellers and stokers, preach syndicalism, and lead strikes. He introduces Billy to working-class misery, warns him against the brutality of business interests, and insists that Billy use his literary talents to further the international labor movement.

While the socialist “conversion novel”—exemplified in works by Sinclair, Jack London, Isaac Friedman, Arthur Bullard, and others—had already become a known genre by 1915, Poole’s work depicts the process with distinctive intensity. At a moment when labor activism and the Industrial Workers of the World were, as Poole claimed, “spreading with amazing speed all over the land,” the



author quotes and paraphrases from actual IWW speeches, giving voice to the proponents of industrial sabotage and anticapitalist violence in an unusually direct way.<sup>14</sup> Before Poole, perhaps only Friedman's *By Bread Alone*, a much lesser novel, had taken the conflict of the middle-class sympathizer to the level of civil war in which neutrality was impossible and the necessity to "decide which side you're on" was mandated by both conscience and historical circumstance.<sup>15</sup> And in *The Harbor* the pull toward the left is felt not only by the protagonist but by a credible group of secondary characters who also afford legitimacy to radicalism and are also from the middle class. The root conflicts they embody go deeper than politics, involving ties of blood and marriage. Billy's family, for example, is split down the middle, a condition that forces the main character to weigh loyalties to his leisure-class wife, his labor-leader sister, his businessman father, and the anarchist who may become his brother-in-law. Within this network of relations all choices carry tragic potential, and yet a choice must be made; as the book's ending suggests, 1914 is "no year for compromise."

What follows from this material is a realistic consideration of questions that self-conscious liberals then and now, cannot avoid: Is calculated violence against corporations justified by the calculated violence they do every day to people and to the planet? What actually can and should be done about poverty by members of the middle class? How practical is the idea of political union between destitute workers and sympathetic bourgeois intellectuals? Can a middle-class writer truly understand workers' hardships or interpret their lives without condescension and in ways that aid them in the class struggle? What are the real and intended effects—for both socially aware writers and their working-class subjects—of politically engaged literature? Viable questions today, as they were for the educated men and women who were famously active for reform causes during the novel's historical present.

In *The Harbor*, Poole follows the progress of an autobiographical main character from a genteel childhood to the advent of his career as a serious novelist. By tracing the struggles of the artist toward maturity, the author works in the fixed and familiar vein of the *Künstlerroman*. The book's twist on this traditional genre is that in Billy's case political growth is the single factor that precedes and enables artistic growth. For twenty-first-century readers, however, Billy's development as an artist will probably be overshadowed by the book's inspired setting: the vast harbor itself, which Poole calls "the world's first port." New York Harbor, in all of its magnificence and ugliness, gives Poole a comprehensive metaphor for the implacable creative-destructive forces behind what we now think of as the American century. Teeming with men and machines, raw industry and abundant consumer goods, the place is a magnet for Billy's imagination and a catalyst to his development. From the opening pages, when the seven-year-old boy attends a sermon by the great preacher Henry Ward Beecher and hears Beecher refer lyrically to "the harbor of life" as a place of safety and rest, Billy is fixated on the waterfront as a source of vital knowledge. His direct experience on the docks, where he befriends gang toughs, "micks," and ragged street urchins, tells him that Beecher is wrong about the harbor—it is not a refuge from the world's cares. As he already senses, it is a place "close to the deep rough tides of life," where immigrants, stokers, deckhands, and prostitutes struggle for survival. Late in the novel Billy comes to a more complex appreciation of the harbor as "a symbol of the changing world that I had seen with my changing eyes."<sup>16</sup>

Understanding the harbor this way—as a measure of both inner psychological and outward material change—actually works generally, offering a means of gauging the sympathies of each major character. Billy's mother, his first influence, tries to keep her son away from the sordid life on the docks. She fails, but she gives Billy the desire to be a writer along with a value system—a broad-minded Christian ethos resembling that of the nineteenth-century social gospellers—that ultimately

draws him toward the labor movement. Billy's father, the owner of a waterfront warehouse, is subjected to wrenching economic transformations. Unprepared for the era of big companies and Standard Oil, he watches his harbor become "clouded in the smoke and soot of an age of steam and iron" and longs nostalgically for the bygone age of towering sails and Yankee clippers. He fails to understand or adapt to the crude industrial forces that have destroyed the old harbor and "crushed the life out of" his commercial hopes and stable worldview.

Poole's younger characters are less static—they change with the harbor, sometimes painfully, and reflect fascinating stages in the evolution of American class and gender attitudes. Raised in an atmosphere of progressive optimism, Billy initially yearns to escape the waterfront and avoid his father's business by writing novels. Since Art is Billy's first godlike principle, his youthful religion is style, technique, and form. The problem, however, is that Billy has nothing to say, no idea of what view of reality his writing should espouse or what social meaning, if any, his novels should have. The notion that it is enough to simply create beauty, an idea derived from his elite education, buoys his fantasy that a sojourn in Paris after college graduation will make him a genuine writer, free of all loyalties except to his romanticized aesthetic ideal. But when Billy returns to the harbor following the death of his mother, his politically indeterminate creativity is exposed as naive when measured against the more dynamic lives of Dillon and Kramer.

Dillon, who helps build global capitalism while promising to "cure" its endemic side effects—massive human suffering and environmental destruction—exemplifies "the real strength of Wall Street." He embodies what Poole calls the "new god . . . of Efficiency," and his great dream in the novel is to organize the harbor according to the theory of scientific management. This principle is described in terms reminiscent of Taylorism: "[A]rmed with Science, its feet stood firm on mechanical laws and in its head were all the brains of all the strong men at the top." Dillon's efficiency becomes a second godlike principle to Billy, who gives up his attempts at abstruse fiction to follow the urban engineer's political lead and write articles in praise of corporate power. As Billy acknowledges, "The first social vision of my life I had through Dillon's field glass."

While this is happening, however, Kramer relentlessly assails Billy's conservatism, reminding him of the "millions of people . . . getting a raw deal and getting mad about it" and warning against the hypocrisy of the "damned respectable upper class." Kramer's impassioned pleas for economic reform derive directly from the IWW lexicon and carry significant weight in the novel. His declarations of an imminent "age of force"—in which violent exploits by "prodigious masses of men" will tear down the institutional order through "direct action"—challenge the belief models of Poole's main character and struck a powerful chord with Poole's 1915 readership. As Billy's social awareness develops he comes variously under the sway of two formidable personalities at ideological war with each other, with Dillon initially more credible and compelling.

Eleanore Dillon, a childhood playmate of Billy's and the daughter of the great industrial engineer, enters the novel as an urbane moderate and vicarious participant in her father's work of remaking New York's maritime infrastructure. An adherent to her father's views, she explores the harbor in her personal motorboat, sometimes with Billy aboard, running business errands and occasionally putting her own engineering knowledge to use in geographic studies that further exploitation of the waterfront. After marrying Billy, however, her sensibilities broaden, less from Billy's urging than from her conversations with Kramer, who forces her to think about class war. She also bonds with Billy's sister, Sue, a nascent feminist who introduces her to the women's movement. Under these two influences, Eleanore evolves politically from suffrage marcher to settlement worker to intrepid relief worker in the novel's great harbor strike. Like the well-dressed Chicago settlement worker that Upton

Sinclair had briefly sketched in *The Jungle*, Eleanor is not above using her influence with corporate bosses to help relieve misery in the slums created by those same corporate bosses. At the novel's end her visits to the poorest dockside tenements with a female strike leader tip the balance, pulling her away from conventional identification with the leisure class and toward a life lived in closer contact with poverty. "I've changed," she announces, "I saw the worst of it, things so wrong in the tenements that big reforms are needed."

By pursuing deep involvements in social causes, Billy's younger sister, Sue, takes advantage of one of the few career options available to unmarried middle-class women in the early twentieth century. Like the altruistic Gertie Ferish in Edith Wharton's 1905 novel *The House of Mirth*, Sue volunteers at the working girls' clubs that were active in New York around the turn of the century. She does not merely march in suffrage parades but helps organize them. She hosts radical gatherings and makes speeches at both women's meetings and workers' rallies. Finally, Sue falls in love with the revolutionary Joe Kramer and becomes what he calls "a regular organizer." Sue is the real revolutionary in Billy's family, a woman who does not shy away even from the idea of direct industrial sabotage. She, as much as any of the book's core personalities, inhabits and expresses what Poole calls "this glorious age of deep radical changes going on." As her relationship with Kramer develops, the question becomes whether it is actually possible for her to sunder all class ties to accept a bitter, hand-to-mouth existence as the wife of an outlaw labor agitator. Perhaps more seriously than Billy, she contemplates the permanent sacrifice of bourgeois privilege.

In creating the character of Billy's sister, Poole did not need a specific historical model; rather, Sue is a much advanced composite of the independent-minded New Woman who was already making waves on the American social scene. Poole's fictional strike heroine Nora Ganey, however, seems an interesting composite of two historical figures. She resembles both Elizabeth Gurley Flynn—the fearless IWW Rebel Girl who was often called the Joan of Arc of the labor movement—and seventeen-year-old millworker Hannah Silverman, the "Paterson firebrand" whom Flynn came to admire as one of the leading figures of the strike. Through their courage and effectiveness as speakers and protesters, these women defied gender stereotypes and showed what female activists could do during strikes if given the chance. Flynn agitated for both the IWW and an early but potent form of feminism. She built confidence among the women strikers and broke down the resistance of male strikers toward female leadership. Silverman was repeatedly arrested at Paterson but always quickly rejoined picket lines to lift morale. She was given the honor of leading the parade of workers to Madison Square Garden on the day of the Paterson Pageant. In Poole's novel, Nora Ganey speaks to an audience of twenty thousand at the Garden, an event that Billy calls "the one great miracle of the strike." Ganey, Sue, and to some extent Eleanor Dillon reflect the emergence of the female labor leader, a phenomenon that was one of the most exciting developments at Paterson and Lawrence.

Considering Poole's evident responsiveness to current social history in *The Harbor*, it would have been surprising if he hadn't reserved a prominent role for the arch-revolutionist and prime force of American syndicalism, Bill Haywood. In labor leader Jim Marsh, Poole paints an accurate portrait of Haywood, one that captures the man's magnetism at the height of his power. When Billy meets Marsh, described as "the great mob agitator and notorious leader of strikes," he feels an "electric shock" with effects less physical than ideological. While still a skeptic of radical change, Billy gets a quick education from Marsh, who shares appalling statistics about workplace conditions, worker death rates, and other indices of lower-class misery. Billy had been introduced to Marsh for the purpose of "writing up" the labor leader in a large circulation journal, something he had already done for Marsh's businessmen enemies. Approaching Marsh with conventionally shaped ideas, Billy is promptly

overwhelmed by the other side of the story: “I could feel him taking my harbor to pieces, transforming each piece into something grim and so building a harbor of his own.”

Aside from the Paterson-inspired presentation of Billy’s involvements, many of the structural details of *The Harbor* have direct analogues in the 1913 silk workers’ strike. The Farm in Poole’s novel, an outdoor site near the harbor where strikers meet for rallies, is a version of Haledon, where the Paterson silk workers held peaceful Sunday afternoon mass gatherings, listened to talks by Poole, Haywood, Flynn, and Carlo Tresca, and sang football songs led by former Harvard cheerleader John Reed. Described in Poole’s novel as the open shore space in front of a dock, the Farm is where thirty thousand “intensely alive” workers gather and where Ganey, Marsh, and Kramer use rousing speeches to unify the ethnically diverse strikers.

At one particularly stirring meeting the trio of agitators takes turns exhorting the crowd. Ganey mourns the thousands of deaths caused by big companies, urging the workers to “strike and strike and strike again—till you make these tenements own the ships—and a life won’t be thrown away for a dollar.” Marsh makes his class-based point by alluding to press accounts of the wealthy women who had recently died in the sinking of the *Titanic*. “We heard a lot about their screams,” Marsh recalls, but the “millions more” killed in “mines and mills and stinking slums” have yet to be heard. Kramer, whose health has been ruined by two years spent shoveling coal in a ship’s engine room, speaks directly to the “men who work in the stokeholes naked” and asks for a moment of silence as “a tribute to all the dead stokers.” The chapter closes with prophecies from Marsh that could well have been uttered by Haywood and repeated as Wobbly policy: “Until we get our share, this labor war will have no end! . . . You will rise—and the world will be free.”

In the next chapter, a version of the Paterson Pageant takes place; even the process by which the pageant was reportedly initiated by Haywood is re-created: “Marsh proposed a parade, and the Farm took it up with prompt acclaim.” The entire polyglot “strike family” marches down Fifth Avenue, causing the shutting down of the retail stores and displacing the well-dressed shoppers, suggesting the antagonism between the labor movement and middle-class consumerism. The event actually resembles a pageant much more than a parade, with dirgelike funeral music and banners announcing OUR WOUNDED and OUR DEAD, followed by a procession of coffins that recasts the most moving scene of the Paterson Pageant: the funeral of striker Modestino Valentino. Mirroring the basic dynamic of the original pageant, this mass action prompts Billy, who is marching with the workers, to recognize the dissonance of his own loyalties. Though he is deeply moved by a spontaneous expression of joy among the strikers, he reflects, “You can’t join in a laugh like that—you’re no real member of this crowd—their world is not where you belong.”

As Billy considers this class-based limitation, the theme of *The Harbor* becomes his own relationship—and the relationship of his writing—to the labor struggle. For a time after he fell in love with Eleanore Dillon, he had submitted wholly to the worldview of capitalist efficiency and written in praise of its power. But a key stage in the reversal of his worldview comes when Kramer leads Billy into the stokehole of an ocean liner for a shocking glimpse of bestial half-naked workers shoveling coal into the ship’s furnace. Poole’s rendering of the hellish scene—where there is “no day and no night, only steel walls and electric light”—recalls the working conditions described in several of Eugene O’Neill’s early sea plays, most notably *The Hairy Ape*. As in O’Neill’s play, which was almost certainly thematically influenced by *The Harbor*, a visit to the stokehole by the slumming adventurer has profound psychological effects: Billy is traumatized by his intrusion into workers’ lives. Noticing his distress, Kramer remarks, “That look at a stokehole got hold of you hard.” Billy’s insistent questions about industrial conditions at his next meeting with Dillon signal a change in attitude—his

faith in efficiency has weakened. Essentially, Billy realizes that his picture of the class struggle had been woefully incomplete. He now decides to forgo the glory stories, write what he sees and feels during his excursions into the labor movement, and present his perceptions to the public with all the realism he can marshal.

When Billy becomes personally involved in a massive strike of stokers and longshoremen, his conversion to socialism accelerates. While attending a worker rally, he is overwhelmed by police, beaten to unconsciousness, and taken to prison with the strikers. Poole describes the various nationalities of the imprisoned workers, their spirited singing, and Billy's newfound solidarity with the poor: "At last with a deep warm certainty I felt myself where I belonged." In his prison cell Poole's alter ego poses the profound questions that are on trial for the rest of the novel and are still on trial for anyone concerned with social justice: "What has all this to do with me? What is it going to mean in my life?"

The paradigm for muckraking novels takes for granted the subject's eventual adoption of a revolutionary stance, and for most of *The Harbor* this seems to be exactly where Billy is headed. The actual outcome of his struggle, however, is not a conversion to political certainty but to a state of inquiry, posing a series of unresolved questions about class relationships. Even when the strike is crushed and the voice of the workers ceases, Billy wonders, "Would that crowd spirit rise again? Could it be that the time was near?" Whatever conversion these thoughts imply remains incomplete because Billy's judgment is intruded upon by a new factor. Before his leftism can fully crystallize, the "first low grumble of war" is heard, and the cause of labor is superseded by what may only be called a more immediate historical concern: the "crashing down" of civilization itself.

Poole's novel closes with an analysis of the incipient war—one of the first in an American novel and one of the most prescient. Months before trench warfare and machine-driven death were generally known horrors, Billy describes efficient, modernized slaughter.

I thought of the long lines of fire at dawn spurting from the mouths of guns . . . from trenches in fast blackening fields—and of men in endless multitudes pitching on their faces as the fire mowed them down.

And five years before F. Scott Fitzgerald's first hero, Amory Blaine, would famously describe the spiritual effects of the war's end in *This Side of Paradise*—"all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken"—Poole offers a valedictory to the "gods of civilization and peace" that were shattered in the war's beginning. While Billy remains hopeful but uncertain that the class struggle can be won, he does know that on the battlefields of Europe the god of his mother's church, the god of corporate efficiency, and the god of the working masses were being plunged into a "furnace of war" from which each would emerge in radically altered form.

Largely because Poole's rise as a writer was so closely tied to the shifting fortunes of history and politics, the national celebrity that he achieved with *The Harbor* did not last. With American entry into the European conflict in 1917, the desire for patriotic unity gave license to the severe curtailment of civil liberties and touched off strong antileft persecutions. Strikes and labor actions of the type depicted by Poole in *The Harbor* were not only no longer front-page news; they soon became illegal under the Sedition Act of 1918. Though Poole initially supported American war aims, after the November 1918 Armistice he was severely disillusioned by reactionary trends in the United States. Events of 1919—the first Red scare, the lynching of Wobblies, the sentencing of socialists to long prison terms—made it clear that his brand of liberalism was out of step with postwar "normalcy." Though he continued to produce fiction and journalism, the 1920s and 1930s saw Poole's gradual fall

from prominence as a cultural figure.

When he died in 1950, Poole's *New York Times* obituary stated correctly that he had won the first Pulitzer Prize for fiction ever awarded, and that he was best known for his acclaimed novel of 1915. But the *Times* did scant justice to Poole's most influential book, blandly misdescribing *The Harbor* only as an "intimate picture of this city." Someone must have realized that the novel's importance had been slighted, for the *Times* immediately prepared an addendum. Published two days later, "The Day of Ernest Poole" better served the historical record by relating the real subject matter of *The Harbor* and placing it in distinguished literary company. The book, it was now acknowledged, stood up to comparisons with Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, Frank Norris's *The Octopus*, and the novels of the great naturalist Theodore Dreiser. It was a work that helped define the muckraking era, a "golden age of American fiction in which powerful "cries of indignation" from American writers registered stark economic injustice and explosive political tensions.<sup>17</sup>

Even this assessment, however, fails to account for all aspects of the novel's contemporary significance. Reading *The Harbor* today, we recognize among its many modern attributes an early warning about the destruction of an ecosystem by corporate greed and consumerism. Almost a century before the Gulf of Mexico oil spill of 2010, Poole's central character wonders whether he should be impressed by the "hundreds of millions of dollars that are being spent on engineering to make the harbor like it should be"—or appalled by the "loathsome blotches and streaks of oil" in the East River, the "foul, sluggish columns of smoke on the Jersey shore," and the hideous miles of acrid-smelling black water poisoned by Standard Oil. Dillon the engineer, one of the earliest depictions in our literature of a corporate talking head, claims despite appalling evidence to the contrary that CEOs know best. His assurances that the pollution problem is being "worked on" call to mind the early twenty-first-century assurances from oil industry executives about the safety of deep-water drilling in environmentally sensitive areas.

In his autobiography, Poole found it interesting that three hundred copies of *The Harbor*, bound for British readers in Liverpool, went down with the RMS *Lusitania* on May 7, 1915. Compared to the nearly twelve hundred lives lost in the sinking of the British liner by a German U-boat, the copies of Poole's book mean nothing materially. But they do make a good symbol, a reminder of the political conditions that often decide the fate of artistic efforts. And the fact that a chain of events beginning with the sinking of the *Lusitania* ended with U.S. entry into a war that throttled socialism at home and ultimately marginalized Ernest Poole as a writer is telling. While the war explains the short-lived viability of American radicalism, making it easy for historians to minimize its importance, it also explains why *The Harbor* was forgotten for much of the twentieth century, and why a new edition of the novel is so necessary. Reissuing this book doesn't change history, but it repairs a loss to our literary history by ensuring that the quintessential story of prewar radicalism did not, in the end, go down with the *Lusitania*.

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## Notes

[1](#) Rideout, 56; Keefer, 54; Golin, 235.

[2](#) “Current Fiction.” *New York Times*, February 7, 1915.

[3](#) Keefer considers it possible that the Pulitzer Poole received for *His Family* just after the success of *The Harbor* was “in part recognition of the importance of its predecessor” (55). In *The Pulitzer Prize* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), John Hohenberg analyzed the prize committee’s deliberations and noted that *His Family* “had not made anything like the impression of Poole’s earlier and more successful work, *The Harbor*” (57).

[4](#) Rideout, 48. For a synopsis of Socialist political gains in the period, see Rideout, 47–48.

[5](#) For detailed accounts of the Paterson Pageant, see Anne Huber Tripp, Steve Golin, and Linda Nochlin.

[6](#) Mabel Dodge Luhan, *Intimate Memories*, v. 3, *Movers and Shakers* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1936), 39.

[7](#) *The Bridge*, 216.

[8](#) *Ibid.*, 66.

[9](#) *Ibid.*, 95, 97.

[10](#) Reed, Mabel Dodge Luhan, and Thompson Buchanan were the other three (*New York Tribune*, June 8, 1913).

[11](#) Leona Rust Egan, *Provincetown as a Stage* (Orleans, MA: Parnassus, 1994), 106.

[12](#) Susan Glaspell, *The Road to the Temple* (New York: Stokes, 1941), 250.

[13](#) *The Bridge*, 199.

[14](#) *Ibid.*, 199.

[15](#) In Friedman’s novel, the central character is wounded attempting to stop fighting between Pinkertons and strikers. The protagonist’s love interest is the wealthy daughter of a steel mill owner.

[16](#) *The Bridge*, 200.

[17](#) “Ernest Poole, 69, Novelist, Is Dead.” *New York Times*, January 11, 1950; “The Days of Ernest Poole.” *New York Times*, January 13, 1950.

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