

PERCY HOLMES BOYNTON

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The
CHALLENGE
of
MODERN
CRITICISM



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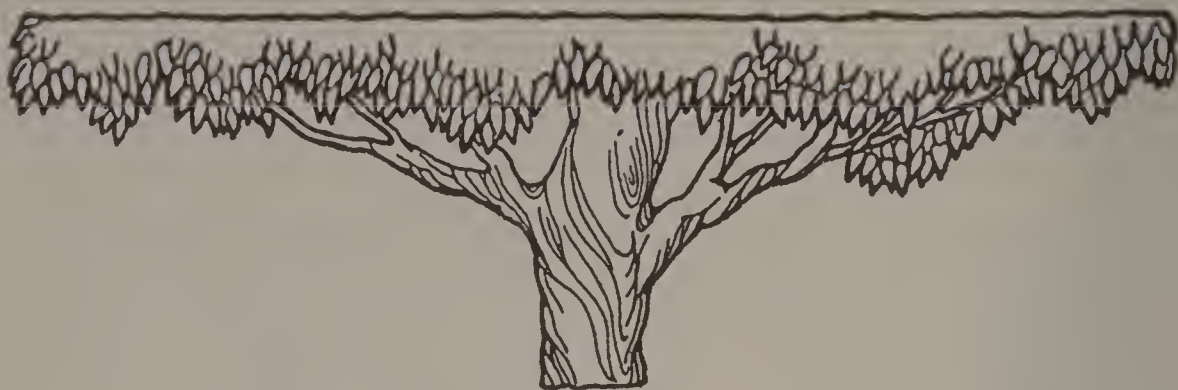
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THE CHALLENGE
of
MODERN CRITICISM



TREE OF KNOWLEDGE
UNIFORM WITH THIS VOLUME



Percy Holmes Boynton
THE CHALLENGE OF MODERN CRITICISM

Tom Peete Cross
HARPER AND BARD

Robert Morss Lovett
PREFACE TO FICTION

Adolf Carl Noé
FERNS, FOSSILS AND FUEL

Louise Marie Spaeth
MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE AMONG STRANGE PEOPLES

James Westfall Thompson
THE LIVING PAST





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THE CHALLENGE OF MODERN CRITICISM

TRADITION — CRITICISM — HUMANISM

*A series of lec-
tures transcribed
by Grace Kiner*

THOMAS S. ROCKWELL COMPANY

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FROM SHERWOOD ANDERSON:

WHEN one thinks of America as it was, but a few generations ago, a vast wilderness across which railroads had to be laid, whose forests had to be cut away and whose cities were yet to be built, one can understand that there was a time in America when to be perpetually on the go, to be a hustler and a go-getter, was a kind of moral duty.

Then, perhaps there was no time to be wasted in this foolishness of trying to understand each other, of trying to really call up before ourselves, through the world of our artists, something of the inner quality of lives. To be a go-getter was then perhaps a moral duty. A tree might have fallen on the head of the pioneer who for a moment lost himself in the effort to understand his neighbor. Alertness was the mood of the times.

It may now be that a time has come to ask ourselves questions:

Are our lives worth living?

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Is it living at all to spend all our best years in helping build cities larger, increase the number and size of our factories, build up individual fortunes, make more dirt and noise and indulge in an ever increasingly louder talk of progress?

Or is there a quieter, more leisurely and altogether more charming way of life we might begin to live, here in America, instead of having to run off to Europe to find it?

Whether the time has come to ask the question or not, it is being asked. That is the most important question the younger generation is asking, a sharp and ever more searching criticism of all the old American shibboleths is going on. In the future . . . we will have less loud talk of freedom and a more determined individual effort to find freedom for expression of lives.

The simple fact of the matter is that if America will but begin to turn more of its natural vitality into the Arts, . . . and also if we can bear, without too much flinching, a determined criticism, I myself believe that the center of culture for the whole western world may be shifted to America.



ONE

AMERICA WAKES UP

IN THE years before 1910 there was little criticism of American life and American literature, in print or out. A critic could not sell his copy to the magazines, even if he thought it worth his while to write it. This was the best country in the best of all possible worlds. The orators said so, the teachers said so, all the books and magazines and newspapers repeated it. But in 1913 John Macy published a small volume of essays called "The Spirit of American Literature." In the first sentence of the first chapter he announced that American literature was a branch of English literature. Then he added insult to injury by proclaiming that the American spirit in literature was a myth, that American literature was only a province of the empire of English literature. Next he asked if it was a virtue or a vice that these things were true. He did not answer his own question when he said that American literature was not provincial enough. Americans, at least those that were being read

widely, did not write about their own province. Instead they were going to Europe and writing about Venice, or translating German ballads, or inditing sonnets to Mount Blanc. The insult was complete when he said: "American literature is on the whole idealistic, sweet, delicate, nicely finished. There is little of it which might not have appeared in the *Youth's Companion*." In parenthesis one wonders what will be the standard of sweet harmlessness in literature since the *Youth's Companion* has combined with the *American Boy*.

Mr. Macy's book is significant because it is one of the first American attempts since Poe to criticise literature apart from morality. He was the first of a host of contemporary critics who were to attempt to break away from the old tradition that literature was good or bad according to whether the author or the characters led moral or immoral lives.

More important than Mr. Macy's volume is a little book which soon followed from Van Wyck Brooks called *America's Coming of Age*, a book which looks beyond literature to life. It is difficult to separate the two; life has a tendency to become literature; and literature has a habit of passing over into life; so that the criticism of life and criticism of literature are often the same thing. The contemporary critics of America, of whom Mr.

Brooks is one of the earliest, devote their time, very largely, to criticisms of life. They hope in that way to influence literature. When they do criticise books they do it on the basis of what they believe about the life that is depicted.

Long ago, Matthew Arnold, one of the greatest English critics, pointed out that a time of true creative activity must be preceded by a time of criticism; that it was not until criticism had done its work that great literature was written. Criticism provides for the creative artist a background of opinion against which he does his work, and Mr. Macy and Mr. Brooks were taking the first steps in forming such a background in America. Criticism is always the result of curiosity, Arnold said further, and curiosity is the result of comfortable leisure. And again: "For the creation of a master-work of literature, two powers must concur, the power of the man and the power of the moment, and the man is not enough without the moment, and the moment is not enough without the man; the creative power has for its happy exercise, appointed elements, and these elements are not in its control."

There have recently appeared in America many active critics, though it is too soon to tell if any great work of creative genius has been produced. Perhaps so far the critics have been occupied in preparing the way for

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the "time of true creative activity," so that when the man comes the moment will be ready for him. A considerable background of opinion has been formed, and, as Mr. J. B. Yeats has said, "The fiddles are tuning all over America."

It would be a great mistake to think that the United States had produced no active critics before the twentieth century. There was much earlier criticism in America, but it was mainly polite writing about polite literature. The public paid scant attention to any of the truly native writers, as they did to the truly American critics. Poe as a critic has been almost forgotten; to most people he was a writer of tales of horror and rather vague poetry. Young colonials like Freneau, Brackenridge, and John Trumbull tried to wake up America and set her to thinking independently even before she had taken any definite steps toward being free politically. Others tried the awakening process as time went on. Emerson delivered his famous address, *The American Scholar*, in which he urged his countrymen to think for themselves, to write their own books, to free themselves from English spiritual domination as they had freed themselves from her political control. But America still slept.

Public attention was fixed on polite literature addressed to the gentle reader. It was furnished in the magazines.

The *North American*, the *Knickerbocker*, the *Southern Literary Messenger*, *Harper's*, the *Atlantic*, all gave it the stamp of their approval. Some of them, since there was no international copyright law, clipped English polite literature—which was, if anything, just a little politer than our own—from English periodicals and published it without payment. Everybody read it; the people who weren't anybody read Beadle's bloodthirsty dime novels. A common man wrote *Leaves of Grass* and lost his government job in consequence. When Cooper took violent issue with the times he was scolded and abused until he retreated a sadder and poorer man. For long years no respectable publishing firm would risk a Whittier volume; Emerson, on account of the frightful heresy of the *Divinity School Address*, in which he asked if there was never to be any more revealed religion as if God were dead, was on the Harvard blacklist for nearly thirty years. When they took him off the blacklist they put him on the Board of Overseers! Thoreau's essay on *Civil Disobedience*, written after he had been in jail for refusing to pay taxes for the support of a nation that countenanced slavery, was discretely overlooked. Even Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* was almost completely ignored in contemporary criticism, a fact that would probably not have been true if Poe had been alive.

at the time it was published. No one ever paid serious attention to the writing of an obscure young man named Herman Melville until very modern times.

The lack, then, was not in the material written; it was in the public attitude toward that material. The literature that was read was addressed to an American who had grown up, as Mr. Brooks expressed it "in a sort of orgy of lofty examples, moralized poems, national anthems, and baccalaureate sermons." But this same American had never been taught that these high ideals had anything to do with his personal conduct. What he had been led to believe was that his whole object in life was to get together, in any possible fashion, all the goods that he could. Making a living was not a means to an end; it was the end. The American ideal of success, wished even today for every graduating school and college boy, is that in the shortest possible time he may accumulate the largest possible amount of things he does not need. "He had been encouraged to assume that the world was a stamping ground for every untrained, greedy and aggressive impulse in him, that, in short, society is a fair prey for what he can get out of it." The only effect that his knowledge of fine ideals had on him was to make him lie to himself about why he was amassing a fortune. He told himself—and others—that he was doing it for

the sake of his wife, or his children, or his country. Actually he was doing it for the joy that he got out of the feeling of power that making and spending money gave him. This capacity for self-deception was one of the first things that the contemporary critics had to fight. The polite attitude toward American life and literature persisted until the early twentieth century. We had the men, but not the moment; Harold Frederic, Stephen Crane, Lafcadio Hearn, and Ambrose Bierce are good examples of men without the moment.

There were five reasons why the country waked up in the first years of the new century: The United States became a world power, the frontier closed and the industrial situation tightened up, the tide of immigration increased and changed in character, science advanced and religion lost its hold on the minds of men, and the new educational methods began to bear fruit.

The Civil War had not brought any changes in the American attitude of mind. The little flurry over Mason and Slidell did not result in any international challenge. There was nothing stimulating in the deadening "return to normalcy" that came after it. Nowhere is this lack of stimulation to the minds of Americans shown better than in the books of General Lew Wallace. He had been through the entire war; during much of it he had

been an important General. He knew the stirring life on the Southwestern frontier. Yet after the conflict did he write on these themes? He did not. He wrote entertaining and intensely moral tales of the Wandering Jew and the early Christian era. We were still a "province in the empire of English literature."

1. But the Spanish American war did bring to America a new sense of strength. For the first time America could count itself a world power, with world-wide possessions and responsibilities. Then Americans began to look about and try to see how America compared with those other countries that had been world powers for generations. What they saw was wealth, military and naval power, broad lands, and mechanical progress. That was sufficiently gratifying. But in literature and art and living the view was not so pleasant. America had stood still for more than fifty years. Hence men like Mr. Macy and Mr. Brooks began to point out why; but the new strength was not to be used until the World War had completed the feeling of emancipation from the old traditions. The moment had come for the new critics to assail the standards of polite literature and polite living.

2. As long as there was open land in the west men had a way of escape. They felt that they could go there and take up new homesteads and be free. There was always

opportunity somewhere else. They might not take the chance, but the thought of it gave freedom to their imaginations. With the glorious west to dream about—kept more glorious by the authors who wrote about it—a man did not need to worry about altering life in the east. He could just leave it for a new clean country, where life could be rebuilt exactly to heart's desire. But with the west closed, men were put—boxed. There was no escape. There was nothing to think about but conditions at home. When men looked about and found that those conditions were not all that they should have been, they began to criticise.

At the time that the frontier closed, the industrial situation tightened up. Great corporations came into the control of industry. Private enterprise and free competition lost ground. Labor saving devices cut down on the use of men in factories. Employment was not so easy to get. In industry, too, men's minds were shut into the present and into the place at hand, and they began to see that neither time nor place was all that it might be.

3. Immigration increased and changed in character. After 1890 it multiplied rapidly. Before that date most of the newcomers had been north Europeans, Germans, English, Irish, Swedes, Norwegians. After that time they were from south and central Europe; Italians, Greeks,

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Poles, Bohemians. They came so fast that America was unable to assimilate them; there were too many for the melting pot. As a consequence they settled in the eastern cities in groups that spoke the languages and carried on the customs and traditions of their native homes. New York came to have more Italians than Rome, more Irish than Dublin, more Greeks than Athens. They did their share toward making employment harder to get. They were one of the factors in the awakening of America. From these foreigners have come some of the keenest critics of America. They could judge us against the background of European culture. They came here believing that America was the land of opportunity, of freedom, of release from all that made Europe distasteful, and they spoke their disappointment.

4. The period after 1890 was a time of scientific research and discovery. The great industries needed science for their development. The crowded cities called for science to show them how to get good water, how to care for their sick, and how to avoid pestilence. Men went from America to foreign universities and brought back the scientific discoveries of Europe. They brought back, too, a more critical attitude toward their old beliefs. Here, in science, was a new world to take the place of the frontier that was closed. Students rediscovered Darwin. Evolu-

tion seemed to give the answer to the question of the origin of life. Soon the biologists and chemists showed that man's body reacted just as did the substances in their test tubes. They made of man in their theories only a machine reacting to stimuli just as did any mechanical device. And some of the writers thought that the chemical-mechanical theory solved the problems of human behavior. To many, religions seemed to have no place in this well-ordered scientific world. Students could see no way to reconcile Darwin and a literal reading of the first chapters of Genesis. Darwin seemed to have proven his points completely, and the proofs of religion were intangible and only in the minds of men. Religion lost much of its hold. There were attempts to protect its teachings by law, but they were the subjects of ridicule. The true scientist said: "I do not know." Others less wise said all over America: "It can't be proved, so it isn't true."

5. About 1915 the new educational methods that had been instituted because of the influence of men like John Dewey, G. Stanley Hall, and William James began to bear fruit. These men had said that children were not bad, that they should not be curbed and checked and forced into molds, but that they should be encouraged to develop, to think for themselves and to express them-

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selves. Schools relaxed their insistence on memory work and urged thinking as well. They dropped much of the Latin and Greek from the curriculum and placed emphasis on science, on the study of literature, and on history. The study of literature meant Shakespeare, Tennyson, Browning, Poe, Whitman. History meant all history, not just that of the United States. Religion was no longer taught in the schools, a step which helped to loosen its hold on the minds of children who were studying science instead. These young people were not to go out from school and accept the world as they found it without question.

Randolph Bourne was one of this younger generation when he wrote in 1911 a series of essays called *Youth and Life*. He carried on the work that Mr. Macy and Mr. Brooks had started. They stirred curiosity and criticism; he was to attack tradition as a spokesman of youth. Said he: "Youth is the incarnation of reason pitted against the rigidity of tradition. Youth puts the remorseless questions to everything that is old and established,—Why? What is this thing good for? And when it gets the mumbled, evasive answers of the defenders, it applies its own fresh, clean spirit of reason to institutions, customs, and ideas, and, finding them stupid, inane, or poisonous, turns instinctively to overthrow them and build

in their place the things with which its vision teems." Here is the fruit of the new educational methods, youth hopeful for the future, youth with vast energy, a vast scorn of things as they are, but with nothing to fight for. One of the purposes of criticism was to give youth something to use that energy for, to point out the causes that needed his help.

Mr. Bourne speaks of the "rigidity of tradition." What is this tradition that has held America in its grasp for a century? Why must the young critics attack it—or defend it as the case may be? Before we go further let us examine it.

The old tradition was founded on Puritanism. When the Puritans came to America they brought with them a set of rules for conduct. Those rules they handed down through all the generations after them. The central belief was that all life should be based on goodness—morality. All art and literature was judged by how well or how ill it upheld morality. Even today thousands of high school children are answering in their book reports the question: "What is the lesson that the author tried to teach?" The tradition meant control, control of emotions, of impulses. It was suspicious of pure pleasure. Things must be good for something. Truth and beauty were the handmaidens of this morality. It was the natural

viewpoint of a people who were concerned chiefly with the saving of their souls. Morality was the bulwark of the home, the church, the school, the marketplace. When it developed into "Victorianism" in the second half of the last century, it became a matter of ideals. Children were taught ideals of conduct, ideals of purity, of patriotism, of honor. The tradition was responsible for polite literature—literature that was largely divorced from life—that was about men and women who had sensibilities instead of emotions, ideals instead of desires. The rigid Puritan degenerated in his twentieth century descendant to a conventional public censor. This descendant could see no need of change. His mind ran smoothly in the rut made for him by centuries of deference to the same conventions.

But to the new generation that was the product of a world in which there was no frontier, in which science had driven out religion, in which the new educational methods were bearing fruit, there was need for investigation of the worth of this old tradition. Mr. Brooks is chiefly interested in the forming of a background of discussion. He wants to make people think. He does not quarrel with Puritanism because he hates it, as so many other critics have done, but because it has been a mixed tradition and the good things about it have been constantly

at war with the bad qualities. He does not want to do away with tradition, but rather to go on through Puritanism to something better. In his *America's Coming of Age* he issued the call to debate. "How can one speak of progress," he said, "in a people like our own that so send up to heaven the stench of atrophied personality? How can any race have progress when all it has to go by is an instinct that it must make money? The first work for our thinkers must be to create a background of ideas strong enough to define the issues of American life." It is the formation of this background of ideas that is, according to Mr. Arnold, the service of criticism.

"America is a vast Sargasso Sea," said Mr. Brooks, "a prodigious welter of unconscious life, swept by groundswells of half-conscious emotion. All manner of living things are drifting in it . . . everywhere an unchecked, uncharted, unorganized vitality like that of the first chaos. It is a welter of life which has not been worked into an organism, into which fruitful values and standards of humane economy have not been introduced, innocent of those laws of social gravitation which, rightly understood and pursued with a fine faith, produce a fine temper in the human animal."

Mr. Brooks sees two great weaknesses in the past.

First, America has been too preoccupied with conquest and acquisitiveness, with a consequent suppression of individuality, and sacrifice of human spirit. The conquest was the result of the youth of the nation. America grew so fast from a tiny group of colonies along the Atlantic seaboard to a nation stretching from coast to coast, that she had no time to develop anything but conquerers along the way. In the settling of the frontier a type of freedom-loving pioneers did emerge, but they had no time for anything but settlement. In any conquest, be it of land or money or religion, the individual must be submerged in the cause if the cause is to succeed. Even one man alone on a new farm has no time to develop anything but the soil. The making of a great fortune means that the best faculty of a man has been spent in money getting. The second weakness is the springing up of a new individualism without any objective but self-expression; for these new individualists did not know what they were to express. They had no objectives. Out of this Sargasso Sea of American life it was the business of the critics of life and literature to salvage balances and standards.

The old tradition did not take into account the changes of American life. The followers of the tradition did not reckon with the advance of science, the change of social conditions, and the vast disorder that was America.

Talent in America was going to waste because there was no standard for it to work by, no criticism to show it where to go, no authority to help it choose an objective. The issues needed definition, so that the new writers might know where they were going, or where there was a chance of going. They needed goals, objectives. The business of defining the issues was the business of criticism.

But before criticism could define issues there must be discussion. The questions of life and literature in America must be talked over. It must be decided if the old tradition would serve for the new conditions. Therefore Mr. Brooks called for debate. There were those to answer the call; those to shatter the walls of the old faiths with the shots of ridicule, those to defend the old traditions, those to offer new faith.

America needed a new faith. She had outgrown the old. Religion did not offer it, Science could only say: "This much we have found out. Beyond this we cannot tell." The old tradition could only say that there was no need of change. Paul Elmer More, one of the critics who answered the call with a new faith made on the foundations of the old said: "Before we have an American literature, we must have an American criticism." Mr. Brooks, speaking for young America said that there must be a new faith, "to formulate that new technique,

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to build up the program for the conservation of our spiritual resources is the task of American criticism.”

The fiddles were tuning. What would they play?

✕



TWO

MR. MENCKEN DOES HIS BIT

HENRY LOUIS MENCKEN is like Edgar Allan Poe, Beelzebub, and George Bernard Shaw. None of these comparisons would offend him. He is like Edgar Allan Poe because he uses much the same critical methods that Poe used, and because they look at their fellow men with the same lack of respect. He is like Beelzebub because his challenge to America is the same challenge that the archfiend flung to his fallen comrades as they simmered in the lake of fire: "Awake! Arise! Or be forever fallen!" He is like George Bernard Shaw because he is the only American that can match Mr. Shaw's impudence.

Of the three, he is most like Edgar Allan Poe. They are alike in method and point of view, but different in period and in personality. Their differences are due largely to the times in which they lived. Poe is a good example of the man without the moment. The period in which he lived was ready only for personal criticism,

so that he spent the talents of a keen mind on reviews of little books. In his day there was no place for criticism that dealt with ideas. There were few ideas active among the public; there were only beliefs and plans. Ideas are the result of excess energy, and Poe's contemporaries were too busy raising cotton and tobacco, moving to the west, and building railroads to formulate general theories about life. Moreover, there had been no general criticism before Poe to prepare the way for him, as there has been for Mr. Mencken. He was a lone voice crying in a wilderness where there was no one to listen.

Mr. Mencken came at the right moment. As we have seen, Mr. Macy had prepared the way for American criticism, and Mr. Brooks had issued the call for debate. That call Mr. Mencken sprang belligerently to answer. His period was ready for him. Since the Spanish-American War Americans had been doing more thinking than they had ever done before. They were responsive to general ideas. The west was settled; big business was pretty well settled as well. The main adventures left were intellectual ones. Life was fairly easy those fifteen prosperous years before the World War; men had time and energy to think abstractly. And as soon as they began to think, they began to question: Was this the best of all possible worlds? Was democracy a success?

Was having your pastor call you Bill at Rotary meeting better than being president of the United States? Did Washington cut down the cherry tree? And Mr. Mencken knew all the answers. Not only that, but he found many more questions that no one had yet discovered and asked them. He asked: Why do Americans elect stupid nobodies to all the public offices? Are there any people in the world so credulous, so silly, so lacking in any appreciation of the finer things of life as the Americans? Why do Americans refuse to look at good literature and read imbecilic twaddle instead? All these and many more he asked. Where Poe had to stick to writing about books, Mr. Mencken can wax as voluble as he pleases about Puritanism in America, the function of criticism, or the cult of hope, and be sure of a reading followed by much discussion. He is the Bad Boy of American criticism. He taunts, he flouts every tradition, he throws stones at all the idols, he hisses all the heroes. Nothing is sacred to him; the world is full of charlatans says he, and he is ordained by himself to expose them all.

It is in consequence of this contrast of periods that the two men are variously different. Mencken is a success; Poe was a failure. Poe was often in want; Mencken lives in the comfort brought with the money that rolls in when he flouts at his countrymen. Poe dreamed for years of

editing a national journal of his own, in which he could discuss life and literature unhampered by an editorial overlord. He died with his ambition unfulfilled. Mencken dreamed the same dream, and has seen it come true in the *American Mercury*. Poe toiled and fought and was disregarded by a generation that was not ready for him; Mencken has jeered and scoffed and has been taken to the bosom of a generation that was prepared for his coming.

Their lives are different. They have both lived in Baltimore, and they both have written for newspapers and magazines, but there the similarities end. Mr. Mencken was born in Baltimore in 1880, thirty-one years after Poe died there. He was educated—a phrase he would object to—at Knall's Institute, a private elementary school, and at Baltimore Polytechnic, a high school. He was graduated at sixteen and worked for three years in his father's tobacco factory. In 1899, after his father's death, he became a reporter on the *Baltimore Morning Herald*. From that time on his rise was as rapid as that of an Alger hero. He was city editor at twenty-three, managing editor at twenty-five, and editor-in-chief two years later. Then he joined the staff of the *Baltimore Sun*, and was sent to Europe as a war correspondent. In 1914 he returned and became joint editor of the *Smart*

Set, and helped to drag that magazine out of the abyss into which it had fallen. In 1924 he and George Jean Nathan started the *American Mercury*. They were joint owners for six years. In 1930, Mencken became sole owner and editor. He still lives in Baltimore, where he is, contrary to all suspicions, an honest and upright citizen, and a pleasant person to have around the house.

The bulk of his work is enormous. His first book and only volume of verse, was published in 1903. Since then he has published some twenty volumes of prose, most of them criticism. He has written five books in collaboration with other men, and articles of his have been published in numerous collections. He has tried verse, short story, novel, drama, every form of journalistic writing, and every branch of criticism and review. In all, he has written and published over eight million words.

But Mr. Mencken is like Poe in his methods of criticism. They are both swashbucklers. They love to slash and thrust and strut about the stage. They are the villains of the piece, and they like themselves in that role. Poe was limited to attacking literary pretense, Mencken declares war on all manner of counterfeit, be it in music, art, morals, or politics. They love to expose quackery, at the same time being a bit of quacks themselves. Mr. Mencken wrote an article *On Being an American*

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that, if anyone took it seriously, would put him outside the pale of decent men. But he wrote it, as Poe wrote much of his most scathing remarks, with tongue in cheek. Poe was forced to perform before empty seats much of the time; Mencken's houses are packed, and he sends his audiences away sometimes angry, sometimes disgusted, sometimes amused, but never indifferent.

They both are gifted in abuse. If the following passages from their criticisms of books were placed side by side with no indication of authorship, it would take a sophisticated student to determine which was Poe's and which was Mr. Mencken's.

Said Poe of Headley's *Sacred Mountain*:

"The book is written in the kind of phraseology in which John Philpot Curran when drunk, would have made a speech at a public dinner . . . Let us endeavor, however, to give some general idea of the work. 'The design' says the author in his preface, 'is to render more familiar and lifelike, some of the scenes of the Bible.' Here in the very first sentence of his preface, we suspect the Reverend Mr. Headley of fibbing; for his design as it appears to ordinary apprehension, is merely that of making a little money by selling a little book."

Of Rufus Dawes's long poem *Geraldine* he wrote:

"The lover brings forth a miniature . . . *sinks* it in the bosom of the lady, cuts his finger, and writes with

the blood an epistle, (where is not specified, but we presume he indites it upon the bosom as it is 'close beside' the picture) in which epistle he announces he is 'another woman's victim,' giving us to understand that he himself is a woman after all, and concluding with the delicious bit of Billingsgate—

'dare I tell?

'Tis Alice! Curse me Geraldine! Farewell.'

The whole passage, perhaps, would have read better thus—

'Oh, my eye!

'Tis Alice! D—n it, Geraldine, good bye.'”

He called Cornelius Mathews a “turkey gobbler,” declared that Lewis Gaylord Clark was “as smooth as oil, or a sermon from Dr. Hawks,” and described C. P. Cranch as “one of the least intolerable of the school of Boston transcendentalists.” Quite in the fashion of Mr. Mencken, he used Hawthorne as a cue for falling foul of public opinion: “The author of *Twice Told Tales* is scarcely recognized by the press or the public, and when noticed at all, it is merely to be damned by faint praise.”

Now move on to Mr. Mencken and see how slight is the change of method:

In William Allen White's “very first book of fiction, there was a flavor of chewing-gum and marshmallows.” Vachel Lindsay, “Alas . . . has done his own burlesque.” “What ails Hamlin Garland is a vision of

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beauty, a seductive strain of bawdy music over the hills. But he has no more feeling for the intrinsic dignity of beauty . . . than a policeman.”

Of *Mary MacLane*, a shocker of the '90's, he says:

“What I mean is simply this; that the secret of *Mary MacLane* is simply this: that the origin of all her inchoate naughtiness is simply this: that she is a Puritan who has heard the call of joy and is struggling against it damnably.”

He hits off his American public in his turn anent of the Rotarians:

“What these fellows say is almost always nonsense, but it is at least the sort of nonsense that the American people yearn to cherish and believe in—it somehow fills their need.”

And in his *Catechism*:

Q. If you find so much that is unworthy of reverence in the United States, why then do you live here?

A. Why do men go to zoos?

Mr. Mencken is like Poe in his point of view. He despises the mob; he, like Poe, feels that he is an intellectual aristocrat. But where Poe's contempt was heightened by his feeling that he was not recognized, Mr. Mencken is happier in knowing that he has had both recognition and reward. He is contemptuous, but not resentful. Poe

was bitter in his isolation, the result of being a man born before his time. His home was poor and full of anxiety; he was always in trouble of one sort or another; he estranged his best friends; he lacked the ability to work long and hard at an uncongenial task. He quarrelled with his employers because he felt that they were his intellectual inferiors, as no doubt they were. He died at forty, just as life seemed to hold out new hope to him. If Mr. Mencken had died at forty there would never have been an *American Mercury*, nor any of the post-World-War writing. Mr. Mencken has a balance in his life that Poe did not enjoy. He has a quiet, pleasant home, where of late years he does all of his writing; he has the rich resources of music, friends, and money. He is probably happier than Poe ever was; he is certainly vastly more comfortable.

Poe was preoccupied with detail effects. He used his criticism of Hawthorne as an excuse for the long article on the technique of composition, which is often printed separately. He has analyzed his "The Raven" to explain exactly how it was done. How a story or a poem was written was often of more importance to him than what it said. He objected to Dickens on the score of the formlessness of his novels. He fought for Hawthorne partly as a means for showing his contempt for the world

which did not recognize genius, and partly because he enjoyed the perfect style of the "rebellious Puritan."

Mr. Mencken is given to more general ideas. What a man has to say is more important to him than his manner of saying it. He has long used Theodore Dreiser as Poe used Hawthorne, to point out the stupidity of a world that refuses to recognize genius. Not that he does not recognize Mr. Dreiser's faults. He sees the lack of a sense of humor, the tediousness of the piling up of details quite irrelevant to the story, the sledge-hammer method of getting effects, but he sees through these the genius portraying the infinite sadness of human life. A glance at a few titles of essays will show his interest in ideas rather than books, or in the manner of writing books: *Scientific Examination of a Popular Virtue*, *Advice to Young Men*, *in Defence of Women*, *The Curse of Civilization*.

Poe was always handicapped in his criticism by the fixed idea that he was a southern gentleman. Because of that he could never write an uncomplimentary review of a book by a woman. Since his period was one in which a great many ladies relieved their hidden emotions by writing bad poetry, he has written many laudatory reviews of long forgotten poems. Mr. Mencken has suffered no such restraint. In his little book *In Defence*

of *Women* he clothes the most unchivalrous views of the sex in such suave language as to make them sound almost polite.

It is interesting to see what Mr. Mencken thinks of Poe. He says in the essay on James Huneker: "Edgar Allan Poe, I am fond of believing, earned as a critic a good deal of the excess of praise that he gets as a romancer and a poet." And again in the same essay: "As for Poe, though he was by nature a far more original and penetrating critic than either Emerson or Lowell, he was enormously ignorant of good books, and moreover, he could never quite throw off a congenital vulgarity of taste, so painfully visible in the struttings of his style." No one would ever accuse Mr. Mencken himself of being "enormously ignorant of good books," but there are many who have already and often said that he "could never quite throw off a congenital vulgarity of taste, so painfully visible in the strutting of his style." They are alike, then, in their ideas and their methods; they are different in the period in which they had to work, and in the worldly treatment of their efforts.

Beelzebub and his angels fell for nine days and nine nights. At the end of that time they awoke in an uncomfortable spot. The leader was the first to take stock of the place to which they had descended. Then he made

his famous cry: "Awake! Arise! Or be forever fallen!" Mr. Mencken does the same thing; he has sounded the alarm to his fellow citizens of "these Benighted States." He is stirring them up as Beelzebub did his cohorts. He has elected himself official attention-caller for America. He has done just what Mr. Brooks called for—stimulated protest, stirred up emotion and abuse, if not intellectual effort. At the least he has aroused some vitality, if not real thinking. For years the undergraduate has worshipped at his shrine. The result has been that the public has made some mental effort, and has learned to be respectful to critical thinking.

Like Beelzebub, Mr. Mencken pretends utter detachment from the crowd. He is in America, but not of it. He believes none of the things that others believe. He is against Puritanism, professors, Rotarians, education, prohibition, comstockery, and any number of other things. He is mostly against the people who are against something. He seldom takes a stand for anything. He is for liberty in all its phases, Theodore Dreiser, and cleanliness. He says himself that his motives are not to be respected. He and Mark Twain are the two real American pessimists. He never follows up an argument; he has no respect for consistency in criticism. Like Emerson he says: "I do not pretend to know what truth is.

I can only present it as it seems to me today. Tomorrow it may seem like something else.”

He is against Puritanism because it seems to him to have taken the joy out of American life and literature, and to have put in its place only notions of what is proper and nice. Rotarians seem to him merely stupid, with their talk of service. He has much of Emerson's feeling for self-reliance, without ever talking much about it. He has a theory that no person can educate another, that beyond the barest essentials education must be won by the individual. He never went to college, so that people are tempted to explain his feeling against professors and education as in the nature of rationalization, a sort of sour-graping. They forget his impressive and scholarly big book on *The American Language*. Prohibition and comstockery are to him merely a curtailing of individual liberty. He is against all laws that curb freedom of speech. He has always disagreed with the public, but, except for certain rather bad-boyish utterances about himself, he has never said a thing that he did not at the time feel to be true.

A collection of the writings of E. W. Howe, publisher of *Howe's Monthly* and author of *The Story of a Country Town*, was made a few years ago and published in London under the title, *Ventures Into Common*

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Sense. Mr. Mencken wrote a lengthy preface to the book in which he states some of his own theories and shows his high approval of the ideas of Mr. Howe. He summarizes his feeling about Puritanism as follows:

“Our Puritan culture, as everyone knows, makes for many laudable virtues: enterprise, industry, philoprogenitiveness, patriotism, the fear of God, a great appetite for brummagen ideals, a high desire to be righteous, a noble gratitude for the fact that we are not as other men are. But one of the things it does not make for is that austere passion which exalts a bald fact above comfort, security and the revelation of God—one of the things it does not promote is common truthfulness. The American, indeed, always views the truth a bit suspiciously . . . he seems convinced that it is dangerous, and perhaps downright indecent.”

He goes on to say that Americans practice everything that they preach against, that they vilify big business and get into it as fast as they can, that they shout for liberty and submit to laws that invade and destroy their most sacred rights, that they profess a personal virtue of the highest nobility and have a crime rate higher than any other civilized country. He thinks the reason for all this is that America is burdened with a code of morals inherited from the Puritans which no healthy race could observe and survive. He suggests as a remedy that we

throw away the old outworn code and form a new one that will fit the facts of civilization in America. But then he argues that Americans are too timorous to do anything of the sort. He boils down Mr. Howe's philosophy of life into seven plain propositions: 1, the only real human motive is intelligent self-interest; altruism is not only bogus, but impossible; 2, it is virtuous to get money because money makes it possible to survive; 3, a man who gets money is a better citizen than one who doesn't; 4, the aim of all reformers is to get something for themselves, when they pretend that it isn't they lie; 5, any American can get money enough to make himself comfortable, barring acts of God; 6, any man who fails to get money enough to be comfortable shows an unfitness to survive and deserves to be exploited by his betters; 7, the people have a remedy for all public abuses in their own hands. If they fail to get relief, then the blame lies wholly upon their own credulity, emotionalism and imbecility. To all of these propositions Mr. Mencken gives his hearty support.

He has a theory about the function of the critic. He is the agent that produces a reaction between a piece of literature and the public. Out of the meeting of the work of art and the spectator come understanding, appreciation, and intelligent enjoyment, which is what the artist tried to produce.

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In chemistry a catalytic agent is a substance that will have such an effect on two other materials. It does not enter into the reaction between them, but it does in some manner cause them to unite. Mr. Mencken feels that he is the catalytic agent for the books he has reviewed and the authors he has introduced to the public. But he is also a catalytic agent in life. He has brought together the public and ideas. He himself has, he thinks, not entered into the reaction, but the public has come to have some understanding and appreciation of new ideas.

Mr. Mencken has brought about a general precipitation of protest, and the protest has led to discussion—the discussion so badly needed in America. He has attacked all the things that America holds most sacred, the law, the home, the school, the church. Nothing has been safe from him. And he cannot be dismissed as a troublemaker talking to hear the sound of his own voice. He has always enough truth in his utterances to sting, particularly since others have been seeing that America was not all that it should be. Because he attacked the old tradition he has led others to defend it, and still others to suggest substitutes. He does not offer any solutions for the conditions that he sees all about. He merely points them out. Perhaps he has, after all, a faith that America has not lost its old courage and pioneering spirit so completely that

it cannot be aroused to remedy matters once the disease is pointed out.

He is like George Bernard Shaw in only one phase, his impudence, and his success in startling people by means of it. One reads his work with the feeling that he is writing with his tongue in his cheek when he seems most serious.

The questions arise: Why should he take all this trouble to point out to America her faults and her stupidities? Why does he concern himself with a nation that lacks any appreciation of truth and beauty? Why does he put on the guise of an evil buffoon, when he is a kindly, gracious gentleman? He works enormously. He has gone all over the world from Aristotle down. He reads a dozen books in order to do justice to a review of one. He might have aligned himself on the side of the dispensers of sweetness and light and made millions of dollars where he has made thousands, but he chose the path of calumny instead. Why?

The answer probably is that by so doing he hopes to change things for the better. By pointing out the stupidities of his fellows he hopes to get them to discuss the matter, and perhaps be less stupid. By ridiculing lack of interest in beautiful things, he hopes to arouse concern for them. By violently attacking injustice he hopes to stimu-

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late thinking about justice. He is an incipient Puritan who has felt the call to duty and is trying his best to deny it. He wants to be—and from his own point of view this is the meanest thing that anyone could say about him—of service to the community.

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THREE

STUART P. SHERMAN
AND THE DEFENCE OF TRADITION

A PERENNIAL question is raised all through life by the conflict between the law of change and the desire for authority. Life is always changing and men always want permanence. The sociologists call the forces the desire for stability and the desire for new experience. Probably it is mental and emotional laziness that makes people want to have life settled, but it is true that the clinging to old things, old homes, old friends, old customs, old traditions, is largely because they represent fixity. Even Edna St. Vincent Millay, poet laureate in her time for the generation that was pleading for release from all old standards and traditions, wrote:

*“The love that stood a moment in your eyes,
The words that lay a moment on your tongue,
Are one with all that in a moment dies,
A little under-said and over-sung.
But I shall find the sullen rocks and skies
Unchanged from what they were when I was young.”*

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Even youth longs for permanence, at least of emotions. Yet all progress, all evolution of any kind comes through the possibility of alteration in life and thought. There are those philosophers who see no advance in the changes in civilization, but most persons cling to the belief in progress. For more than two centuries in America the Puritan tradition was the response to the desire for authority. It made no attempt to answer the law of change; it insisted that human nature and the moral law did not change.

The tradition held that the permanent things were beauty, truth and goodness. The assault on tradition attacked the conventional ideas of all three. In the field of the arts the questions were asked: What conventions are settled? How far may one experiment? For a long time Aristotle was the final authority on beauty in the world of fine art, and questions concerning beauty were decided by going to him. Then the pragmatists evolved the idea that a thing was good if it produced the desired effect. One did not ask if a picture, or a poem, or a piece of music was orthodoxly beautiful or not, he asked what the artist had tried to do, and if he had accomplished his purpose. Experimenters said that there should be no ruling conventions, and became very wrathful when critics tried to judge their work by con-

ventional standards. Artists painted pictures without form or perspective; musicians wrote songs without melody; poets made poems without rime or rhythm; novelists wrote stories in styles unintelligible to persons who were not in the secret of how they were written.

In the field of learning the assault was on the tradition of truth. The young critics asked: Is there any ultimate truth? Is any tradition safe from new truth? Does not truth grow and change just as human beings grow and change? Humanity has often thought that it has reached ultimate truth, that there was nothing more to be learned. The final truth at one time was that the earth was flat; anyone who believed the contrary was laughed at, if not persecuted. Most people fully expected Columbus to fall over the edge and be lost forever. Copernicus found that the sun was the center about which all the planets moved, but he did not dare publish his knowledge until he was dying, for the accepted truth of his day was that the earth was the universal center. Christian ministers of the early days of Puritanism were sure that they could tell definitely if a man's soul was saved or not. Scholars all through the ages have been sure that they have arrived at the final borders of truth, only to have the next generations disprove their discoveries.

Truths go in and out of fashion. They go in cycles,

like women's fashions. Robert Frost wrote in his poem *The Black Cottage*:

*“ . . . why abandon a belief
Merely because it ceases to be true?
Cling to it long enough, and not a doubt
It will turn again, for so it goes.
Most of the change we think we see in life
Is due to truths being in and out of favor.”*

Perhaps there are no new truths; it may be that men merely become aware of a truth that they did not know about before, and then they proclaim it as new. Science discovers new laws every day, but the laws are not new. They were there all the time; it is just that the scientist succeeded in discovering one that he had not known about before. Evolution had been going on eons before Darwin. The law of gravitation had been acting for millions of years before the apple fell on Newton's head, and objects immersed in water were buoyed up by a force equal to the weight of water they displaced ever since there were water and objects to be immersed.

The defenders of tradition repeat: Is there no ultimate truth? Is there no firm platform upon which men can take their stand? Is the wish for permanence in the human heart a perverted desire? Is there no tradition that is safe from new truth? James Russell Lowell an-

swered the questions many years ago, before the current discussion had arisen:

*“Nothing that keeps thought out is safe from thought.
For there’s no virgin-fort but self-respect,
And truth defensive hath last hold on God.”*

And Emerson at about the same time was saying:

“No truth so sublime but it may be trivial tomorrow in the light of new thoughts. People wish to be settled; only so far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them.”

In the field of conduct the assault on tradition is on goodness—on individual and social ethics. The critic asks if any social institutions are fixed, if the ideals of the state, the church, the school, the market, the family, are permanent. And he finds sufficient proof that they are not. Modern Russia is making a vast experiment in doing without the traditional ideals of church and family. Modern living conditions in America are taking away from the family its traditional influence as the center of social and religious life; while divorce, frowned upon by church and society a few years ago, has become a commonplace. The critic finds that patriotism is a military matter to most people, to be called for only in time of war, allied closely to bands playing and flags waving. The church is not filling the needs of modern life, sometimes because it cannot find out how to

meet them, often because it refuses to see that the needs of modern life are different from the needs of fifty years ago. The church is very apt to say: We have hold on the eternal things, the things that do not change; therefore we need not alter our way of meeting human problems.

But the critic finds that the field of social conduct, the market, and the family must not be talked about in conservative circles. The changes that have come over them must not be recognized. Codes are to be accepted; one must not have ideas about them. If one questions the changes in the church he is an agnostic or atheist; if he discusses the state or the market he is an anarchist; if he points out the changes in the family he is a bolshevist. All of these charges have been hurled at Mr. Mencken time and time again.

For the individual the attack is on morality. The critic of the old tradition asks: What is morality? Are morals derived from experience or are they imposed by a standard outside one's self? Can morality ever be settled? Must it not take into account the changes in society? Then he probably points out that in some societies the having of three wives is not only nice, but necessary and highly moral, that in others a bare body covered with tattooed green and yellow and red scrolls is the height of beauty, and that in still another the highest

truth may be that a yearly trip to Mecca is most acceptable unto the Lord.

The challenge came to authority. It was called upon to defend itself from the attacks of those who advocated change. Mr. Mencken questioned all the canons of beauty, truth and goodness as accepted by authority. In his train came Joel Elias Spingarn, Burton Rascoe, Ernest Boyd, Hartley Grattan and others. It was the task of the traditionalists to find a champion to meet with them in the lists of criticism.

In any debate the onlookers must discriminate between what is rooted in conviction and what is rooted in prejudice. Too much argument is vituperative; the contestants spend more time throwing mud balls at their opponents than they do explaining their own position. And it is always the conservatives who get the most excited and throw the blackest balls. That is probably because conservatism is a defensive attitude. The attackers have the whole world to rove about in, while the defenders must stay at home and wait for some one to come to them with ideas that they may oppose.

All debaters are moved by a discontent with American life. The conservatives are dissatisfied because it has fallen from the ways of their fathers; the liberals are out of patience because they do not like the places into which

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it has fallen. The conservatives advocate more deference to authority and to standards of right living and a closer holding to tradition; the liberals want more freedom, more chance to work out their own salvation, more liberty for experiment. Both sides see that there is room for improvement, but they disagree as to how the betterment shall be brought about. Mr. Mencken and his forces would tear down all the old traditions, cast Puritanism completely away, get rid of outworn morals, discover fresh truth and beauty to fit a changing world.

To answer him and his kind, the school of culture and authority raised up a champion, who for many years was to fight their battles before the world. Van Wyck Brooks and John Macy had prepared the moment for Mr. Mencken. By his assault on tradition he had prepared the way for the defender of tradition. This defender was Stuart Pratt Sherman, a vivid personality, a fighter who fought a good fight, a dramatic critic of life and literature.

Stuart Pratt Sherman was born in Iowa in 1881. His parents were New Englanders, so that he went to Williams College, where he took his A.B. degree in 1903. In 1906 he was given a Doctor of Philosophy degree from Harvard. After some years as professor of English at Northwestern University at Evanston, Illinois, he went in 1911

to the University of Illinois, where he was first professor and then head of the department of English. In 1924 he left Illinois to go to New York as literary editor of the New York *Herald Tribune*. His death in 1928 made a large gap in the ranks of the American critics of this generation.

Mr. Sherman was for many years the spokesman for the school of culture and tradition. He was for close adherence to standards rather than freedom, for decorum against license, for culture versus nature. In his defence of tradition he was a Puritan coming back to his heritage. In 1923 he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters to fill the place left vacant by the death of Thomas Nelson Page. He was proposed by W. C. Brownell and Paul Elmer More, and at the time of his election was the youngest member of that august body. If any proof of Mr. Sherman's original conservatism were needed, election to the Academy would supply it, for no critic but a tried and true follower of the tradition ever enters the portals of the edifice. But his election is especially interesting in view of the fact that he was already in 1923 turning away from the paths of tradition.

A paragraph from Mr. Sherman's essay on Shakespeare states his early creed clearly and simply.

“The philosophical mind of Shakespeare's age began

the work of reflection by cleaving the universe along three levels. On the lowest level is the natural world, which is the plane of instinct, appetite, animality, lust, the animal passions of affections; on this level the regulation is by necessary or natural law. On the middle level is the human world, which is regulated and, in a sense, created by the will and knowledge of man; working upon the natural world; but governed by reason, the special human faculty; and illumined more or less from the level above. On the third level is the supernatural world, which is the plane of spiritual beings, and the home of eternal ideas.”

He believed that the critic should have arrived at some philosophy of life, that he should know what he believes in, be able to explain why, and wish to be convincing in his explanation. He maintained that the finest product of civilization is a highly cultivated gentleman capable of playing a fine role with fine consistency. But this means that a critic must be a man who has enough of the culture that he criticises to have, not only discrimination and conviction, but also fairness and courtesy. Often Mr. Sherman himself had neither, when engrossed in an argument. He was a good hater. He fought a running battle with Mr. Mencken; neither one could pass the other without shouting an insult. When Mr. Mencken said “lascivious” and Mr. Sherman sneered “the young, the innocent, the inexperienced” the reader is reminded

not of two gentlemen of letters defending abstract causes, but of schoolboys in a vacant lot stirring up wrath and getting their own courage up for the fray.

Mr. Mencken had been fighting Puritanism from the beginning of his literary career; now came Mr. Sherman to take up the cudgels for it. The enemies of Puritanism said that it was too conservative, the enemy of progress; Mr. Sherman pointed out that Puritans had been the ultra-liberals through all their history. In every country where they have arisen they have been the opponents of the established order. In England they rose against the established order and took off the king's head. "Was this," asked Mr. Sherman, "a stand-patting for old forms, a defence of hidebound tradition?" They made the first break since 1066 in the line of English kings and maintained that break for eleven years; they attacked the church; they were active enough in their insurgency to leave the country that was their home and go across the unknown seas to found a home in a wilderness. They were the courageous dissenters of the days of Charles II and after. They were, said Mr. Sherman, the people responsible for most of the change and development in America.

The essential features of the eternal Puritans are, according to Mr. Sherman, dissatisfaction with the past,

courage to break sharply with it, readiness to accept discipline in order to attain a nobler life, and a serious desire to make the better life prevail. He tries to free the Puritan from the exclusive association with the manners and morals of any given historical period. The modern idea of a Puritan is drawn largely from the caricatures made of him in the writings of men like Samuel Butler and John Dryden. These men were trying to please a king who had lost a father and a throne because of the Puritans, so that writings that put them in unfavorable lights were no doubt pleasing to him. But Puritanism is not a fixed form of life, but rather an exploring and creative spirit, with an immense passion for improvement, and an equally great ability for self-discipline.

He traced the Puritan in history to show that Aristotle recognized the element in man when he said that the desire for perfection was a fundamental human desire. Jesus was a Puritan in relation to the corrupt Jewish tradition; Socrates, Plato, Confucius, Buddha, all were Puritans, because they saw that to attain the better life a man must submit to self-denial and suppress some impulses in order to liberate others. Of Americans he used Benjamin Franklin and Emerson as examples of Puritans.

Besides its insurgency Mr. Sherman defended Puritanism on the grounds of its integrity, its sincerity. The

Puritans have never had any desire but to lead lives of self-control, of moral purpose, of "harmonious perfection of body and soul." He believed firmly that a Puritan democracy was the only kind that we have any reason to suppose will endure. Despite the critics who were crying aloud that Puritanism was the force that was stunting all that was free and joyful and lovely in America he said: ". . . The Puritan is profoundly in sympathy with the modern spirit, is indeed the formative force in the modern spirit." He believed that the Puritans had supplied the self-control, the moral honesty, the strength, that gave the backbone to American character. In a nation that has spread itself from coast to coast in less than a century, that has had to absorb millions of immigrants from every race in the world, Puritanism has stood as the solid rock in a welter of change. In England the royal family, which still refuses to recognize divorce, gives a permanent standard of morals. In France a national church supplies the moral standard. America had neither king nor church; she had only Puritanism, which for two hundred years upheld the old traditions of restraint and self-control and decorous ways of life.

However, Mr. Sherman saw as well as another the disadvantages of a Puritanism gone-to-seed, that wants to impose narrow ideas of morality on others. He deplored

alike the spirit that would pass so-called Blue Laws to force conformity to another's standards of right and wrong, and the spinsterish primness that objects to such manifestations of the times as a one-piece bathing suit. He did not think that such traits were the essence of Puritanism, even though they roused the most enmity.

Because he believed in the dignity of human life he was an opponent of the naturalists, who thought that man was merely an animal swayed by brute impulses, whose actions could be accounted for by the laws of chemical affinity. As a consequence he had nothing good to say about the work of Theodore Dreiser, and it was at this point that he met Mr. Mencken in closest combat.

He attacked the theory that Mr. Dreiser was giving an unbiased, a photographic reproduction of life. He contended that it was impossible to write about life without selecting certain details to record. The choosing of details, the arranging and recording them, cannot be done without some theory about life. Mr. Dreiser claimed that he had none, that he merely put down what he saw. Each generation seeks to tell the truth, John Bunyan no less than Mr. Dreiser. The difference is in the thing that each generation takes for truth. And out of his five novels—Mr. Sherman had not read *The American Tragedy*—he formulated Mr. Dreiser's theory of life:

That man was an animal amenable to no law but the law of his own temperament; that society is a jungle in which the struggle for existence continues and must continue, on terms unaltered by legal, moral or social conventions; that men are greedy, quarrelsome, sensual; that women are vain, soft, pleasure-seeking, and easy prey for any man. This philosophy, said Mr. Sherman, forever excluded Mr. Dreiser from the field of character in which a great novelist must work.

In Mr. Sherman, Mr. Mencken found a foeman worthy of his steel. Mr. Sherman could get just as vituperative as his enemy could, and he had a fine scholarship to back up his cause. His journalistic power was very nearly as great. He exposed the lack of variety in Mr. Dreiser's method, the poverty of his ideas, and the unreality of the actions of some of his characters. Some of his passages sound like Mr. Mencken at his most scathing.

"In *The Financier* he 'documents' these truths about Cowperwood in seventy-four chapters, in each of which he shows us how his hero made money or how he captivated women in Philadelphia. Not satisfied with the demonstration, he returns to the same thesis in *The Titan*, and shows us in sixty-two chapters how the same hero made money and captivated women in Chicago and in New York. He promises us a third volume, in which we shall no doubt learn in a work of sixty or seventy

chapters—a sort of huge club-sandwich composed of slices of business alternating with erotic episodes—how Frank Cowperwood made money and captivated women in London.”

He was a defender of tradition, of the tradition of fine literature, of orderly living, of love of country. He did not think that any man could be a good critic who did not have a firm groundwork in the classic writers. Literature was to him the emancipator of a man from the bondage of the present. He was sure that a man would find happiness only by controlling his own desires, by following “the unwritten laws of God that know no change.” Those laws he believed were the laws of denial. For many years Paul Elmer More, Irving Babbitt, and W. C. Brownell were his greatest present-day literary heroes, but he deplored the fact that they were not popular with a larger public. He was as apt to faults of temper as any ultra-conservative; the violence of his convictions often went over into the violence of his prejudices, but he prepared the way for the men that he admired most to come to the front in American criticism. He supplied the other opponent in the debate that Mr. Brooks called for.

The World War had a deep significance to Mr. Sherman. To him it was a fight between the forces of naturalism as exemplified by the German army, and the forces

of humanity. It proved for him that mankind did uphold certain principles of truth and right living, and was willing to die for them. He was sure that out of the war would come a nation seeking law and order, stability, justice, gentleness, and wisdom. He was in favor of America going into the war long before she did; he believed that there was a fine American tradition that must be upheld. In an age that rather scoffed at patriotism, as young America did before the World War, he cherished it as one of the fine traditions upon which the nation had been founded.

One of the defects of Mr. Sherman's discernments was that to him America was British. He could not see that the country had any other mother than England; to him America was Britain transplanted to this continent. He forgot that this was a hodge-podge of nations. Any idea that was un-English was apt to incur his severest criticism. It was one of the convictions that oftenest spilled over into prejudice, and some of his bitterest homilies were directed toward the groups of radical thinkers whose roots went back to central Europe.

Another even more serious defect was his bad temper with the people who differed with him. He had a tendency toward breaking the rules of fair play in criticism. It was his greatest weakness in the humanistic-naturalistic

controversy—a weakness of which his opponents took full advantage.

When he first went to New York in 1924 he was editor of *Books*. He went over to the literary editorship of the *Herald Tribune* very shortly and a change came over his work. It seems to have been an indication of a change in the man. As early as 1912 when Mr. More was editor of the *Nation* he had refused an essay of Mr. Sherman's on *Rousseau and the Return to Nature*. It was a defense of Rousseau against the critics who represented his teachings about nature as an attack on civilization and society. That was the only article of his that Mr. More ever refused while he was with the *Nation*, but it is indicative of the events that happened twelve years later. In the years when Mr. Sherman was at the University of Illinois he won the praise of Mr. More and the commendation of Mr. Babbitt, who wrote to him: "The critical gift you are developing strikes me as just the kind that is needed in the country and at the present time. I am beginning, however, to look on you as a very dangerous man and am going to do my best to keep on good terms with you."

Whether it was the change from the scholastic life in Champaign or the influence of work on a great metropolitan daily that caused the change in Mr. Sherman no

one knows. From being the chief spokesman for tradition he slid over into a defence of modernism. He endured it at first, then embraced it wholly. In "An Imaginary Conversation with Mr. P. E. More," he wrote of the average American: "He would have discovered in the average man . . . courage, fortitude, sobriety, kindness, honesty, and sound practical intelligence . . . he would have learned that the average man is, like himself, at heart a mystic . . . a lonely pilgrim longing for the shadow of a mighty rock in a weary land." Which sounds much like the Reverend Mr. Headley addressing a meeting of the Rotary Club at Hunker's Corners, but not at all like the calm scholarliness of a professed disciple of Paul Elmer More and Irving Babbitt.

In the columns of the *Herald Tribune* he came to speak indulgently of the modern generation and modern fiction and to compare it with Fielding and Smollett. He finally even found it in his heart to defend Mr. Dreiser. He had always lamented that Mr. More and Mr. Babbitt would take no steps to become more popular with the masses; now he turned from them completely. Mr. More wrote to him: "I do not like to see a man of your ability take up the job of whitewasher." And again: "Yours is a sickly sort of democracy at bottom, and needs a doctor."

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Perhaps if Mr. Sherman had lived to see popular discussion and opinion swing to humanism, and had seen Mr. More and Mr. Babbitt emerge as the leaders of the movement he would have returned to the fold. At any rate he had done his share in defending tradition; it was for others to carry on the war.

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FOUR

AMERICA AND THE OLD WORLD

IN THE last few years a great many people have tried to arrive at general estimates of American life. Individual Americans, either native or foreign, have tried to judge the life and culture of the nation; novelists have written about America in terms of what they knew about Europe; groups of Americans have expressed themselves jointly; and foreign interpreters have tried to explain how the New World looked to them. These attempts to estimate America are significant because they set America against broad backgrounds of time and of current life in other countries. Some of them deal with the nation as a product of the past and some in its relation to the present-day world.

American novelists for many years have been judging life in America against the background of foreign civilization. In the 1890's Howells, Henry James, Edith Wharton, and Henry B. Fuller wrote with an extensive knowledge of European life and culture. Before them

had been Irving, Longfellow, Lowell, and Hawthorne, all of whom found Europe delightful largely because of the contrast between old Europe and new America. The reading public before the Civil War was confined largely to the Atlantic states, and life there did not offer a great contrast to the life of England. But after the war authors like Eggleston, Mark Twain, Harte, Cable, and Harris began to use local types and American scenes in fiction. The reading public widened and people saw that America was something quite different from Europe. The books of Howells and James showed the deep-seated contrasts between the children of the New World and the heirs to the Old World civilization.

A few persons became prosperous enough to travel abroad, and it was in deep contempt of their awestruck attitude toward foreign institutions that Mark Twain wrote *Innocents Abroad*. He wanted, he said, "to show them how Europe would look to them if they saw it with their own eyes instead of the eyes of the people who had traveled those countries before them." As an understanding of European civilization the book is of little value, but it did arouse an interest in the question of cultural differences. In two of his early books Booth Tarkington did much the same thing. The hero of *His Own People* goes to Europe, makes a fool of himself, and

comes home disillusioned and ready to claim that the courthouse square is more attractive than the Acropolis.

Howells and James measured American character by what they knew of Europe. The results were educational to the American who had been brought up to think that he was the standard of all things. Mr. James had been bred and educated largely in Europe, though when he went to England to live he carried with him a good knowledge of the best of American civilization. He was fond of bringing an American to Europe in his novels and watching the interaction of the two cultures. And it is not always the American who fails; the hero of his novel, *The American* is the most impressive character in the book. Mr. Howells is not so sure of himself. He is more the humble pilgrim going to the shrine of culture. He has no wish to criticise, but only to admire. His early books are nice stories for nice people, particularly nice Boston people. When his characters go to Europe, as the lady of the Aroostook does, they shock the Europeans by a lack of conventions rather than by a deliberate breaking of them. His later books are criticisms of America at home rather than abroad.

Henry B. Fuller, a Chicago author, spent several years abroad and wrote his first two and last novels with European settings. He, too, drew his enjoyment from Europe

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because it was different from America. Mrs. Wharton is a follower of Henry James. She was educated on both sides of the Atlantic, so that she is keenly conscious of the contrast between the culture abroad and the general lack of it at home. She sees that an Englishman going to Italy moves from one set of traditions to another set, while an American goes from no traditions to a bewildering array of them.

While the novelists had been arousing interest over the contrast between America and Europe, the critics had been doing their bit to define the differences. James Huneker, Harry Thurston Peck, W. C. Brownell, each in a different way, had been writing about America and its relationship to Europe since the 1880's. Mr. Macy said that American literature was a part of English literature; these critics said that America was the heir to Europe in culture as well. The immigrant coming into the country compared America with the civilization that he had known in his old home. Because he had expected much he was often disappointed and wrote bitterly about his disillusionment. Americans went abroad and came back to compare our culture with that they found across the ocean.

This inclination to compare is human and wise. A boy leaving home for the first time to go to college comes

back to find that the home-town is interesting for reasons that he had never noticed before. He is judging it against the background of his college halls. In a like manner the critics try to estimate America against the background of history, or of current life in other countries. They ask: What is America? What does it mean? How did it get this way?

Three recent books by Americans which relate us to European culture may be used as illustrations. They are: *Sticks and Stones* by Lewis Mumford, published in 1924, *The Re-discovery of America* by Waldo Frank, 1929, and *When the West Is Gone* by Frederic Paxson, 1930. Mr. Mumford's book deals with American life and ideals from the earliest settlement to the present day in terms of architecture; Mr. Frank's book is chiefly historical and philosophical; while Mr. Paxson's is concentrated on the history of the frontier and its influence on American life, and the effect that the closing of the frontier has had on the country. They all relate America to its background in Europe. They try to answer some of the questions that other critics are asking.

Lewis Mumford has chosen to make his interpretation of America in terms of architecture because it is an art that is closest to the life of a people. Every person goes under a roof at least once in every twenty-four hours.

Buildings are the homes of family life, of religion, of work. They are symptomatic of the life of the nation as a whole. He writes in the foreword: "This is an attempt to evaluate architecture in America in terms of our civilization. . . . I have tried . . . to criticize the forces that from one age to another have conditioned our architecture and altered its forms."

America started as an heir to medieval Europe. For a hundred years the New England villages carried on the tradition of common land and village life that was dying in England when the Puritans came to America. These communities were the true garden cities of America. Into the houses went fine material and careful workmanship; the life and the architecture of the first provincial period were both sound. The great elm trees that lined the streets were an important part of the city plan. They softened the bare outlines of the houses—for the Puritan was suspicious of ornament—provided shade, and served as windbreaks in winter. "Would it be an exaggeration to say," asks Mr. Mumford, "that there has never been a more complete and intelligent partnership between the earth and man than existed, for a little while, in the old New England village? In what other part of the world has such an harmonious balance between the natural and the social environment been preserved?"

The New England town expressed the common social, political, and religious life of the community, but the city of the second period was originated in a trading post and was set up for the purpose of gain in money rather than use in living. It was laid out, not for the comfort of man, but for the benefit of the real estate speculator. The gridiron plan of plotting a city—the universal American square blocks—had no relation to human needs. It did not provide for a natural center of the city's activities; the public buildings might be scattered miles apart, as they are in Chicago and New York. It did not provide for gardens, nor sunlight for houses, nor for the proper use of the natural beauties of the location. It made every street a potential business street.

The decade between 1890 and 1900 saw the rise of "the imperial facade" in American architecture. In the days of Roman glory the Forum and its adjacent buildings made a center for the city, a noble white face to show visitors. But the imperial facade masked the worst slums of the city. The World's Columbian Exposition at Chicago in 1893 with its united architectural plan gave the stimulus to other cities to make for themselves imperial facades.

This stimulus came at a time when the west had been closed to settlement, and the major resources of the coun-

try had come under the control of centralized capital. It was the time of Big Business. Big Business wanted the imperial facade so that land values would go up, not because it would make the life of the people living in the city more comfortable or happier. The town now was a spending rather than a producing center. It had money to burn and burned it by making a "city beautiful" with a towered concrete front behind which swarmed badly housed millions. The great amphitheatres and arenas such as the Yale Bowl, the Harvard Stadium, and Soldier's Field in Chicago supplied the places for the football games and prize fights that took the place of the gladiatorial combats of ancient Rome. Mr. Mumford has this to say of the imperial facade in America:

"Our imperial architecture is an architecture of compensation; it provides grandiloquent stones for people who have been deprived of bread and sunlight and all that keeps man from becoming vile. Behind the monumental facades of our metropolises trudges a landless proletariat, doomed to the servile routine of the factory system; and beyond the great cities lies a countryside whose goods are drained away, whose children are uprooted from the soil on the prospects of easy gain and endless amusements, and whose remaining cultivators are steadily drifting into the ranks of an abject tenantry."

In Rome the imperial facade covered a rabble of dirty

slums; in America it covers districts overpopulated and uncomfortable, dwellings that are no longer either houses or homes, that are fast becoming only sleeping places and storage closets.

Today America has arrived at the machine age. Everything has become standardized: clothes, amusements, education, houses. Building is no longer a direct matter of an architect's planning and a builder's construction. It is an assembling of machine-made parts. Windows and doors, plumbing fixtures, stair rails, cupboards, book shelves, are all made by different factories and sent ready to nail together. There is little real building except among the very rich; there is only assembling. Anyone who has tried to get a washbowl in his bathroom high enough to fit the comfort of a man six feet tall, or a window with three panes of glass rather than two, has struck the unanswerable argument: "They don't make them that way."

Cities are becoming deep canyons between walls; humanity is lost in the machinery that it has created. High buildings have shut out the sun, and forced the substitution of electric light. Artificial ventilation has had to provide the air that other high buildings shut out. Soon buildings may be made without windows; as soon as the old prejudice in favor of them—a holdover from the days

when grass and trees and passing neighbors could be seen through them—has been overcome. Many public buildings already have rules against opening the windows, because an open window interferes with the ventilating system. Cities have become so crowded that subways and elevated trains must transport workers from home to factory. Often the entire leisure of a worker is taken up in going to and from his place of employment. By making the open spaces of the city into building sites the city dwellers have been forced to go outside on Sundays and holidays if they are ever to see any vegetation or get any fresh air. To accommodate them hard roads are built and motor cars are sold. Instead of machines making life happier and more interesting they have done the opposite thing; they have made men pay for them and for the remedy from them. Buildings have become machines and human beings have become machine tenders.

There have been some attempts to build houses that fit the needs of the people who occupy them. The adobe houses of California, the classic homes of the south with great porches, the square farmhouses of the middle west with big living and dining rooms downstairs and many small bedrooms upstairs to provide for large families, have all been attempts to fit the needs of their occupants. But as a whole the residences of America are miscellaneous

things of all sorts, like the enthusiasms of adolescence. Mr. Mumford sees the need for a new unity. "Our mechanical and metropolitan civilization, with all its genuine advances, has let certain human elements drop out of its scheme; and until we recover these elements our civilization will be at loose ends, and our architecture will unerringly express the situation. Home, meeting place, and factory; polity, culture, and art have still to be united and brought together, and this task is one of the fundamental tasks of our civilization." He believes that if the cities continue to grow as they have done, they will eventually fall under their own weight.

Mr. Frank in his *Re-Discovery of America* starts with the decline of Europe. Out of old Europe has come new America. Early in his book he lists the fourteen general convictions that were the basic ideas of life in medieval days. They were the convictions that: the universe revolves around man, man is the lord of all creatures, his reason is absolutely sound, he knows what is good and what is evil, the practice of good makes for life and blessedness, divinity is concerned with man's well-being, the senses give us reality, man knows what matter and thought are, the law of cause and effect is absolute, time and space are real, human individuality exists absolutely in Time and Space. All of these convictions have been un-

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settled in modern times. Astronomer, philosopher, and physicist have combined to dislodge them. With them went the growth of European civilization; out of the decay came the new America.

He likens man to a savage in a jungle in which the dominant growth is the machine, and where in place of animals are the pulls of economic forces. So far there has been confusion without unity. From the confusion has come power, the power of the machine, but instead of making the machine serve the ends of man, humanity is feeding itself to the machine. The reign of power has made men servile; they have lost freedom and creative ability. The temple of the gods of power is the skyscraper. Mr. Frank lists the cults of power. They are: Success, the Machine, Efficiency and Service, the Fraternal Organization, Sports, Crime, Sex, Humanitarianism, Education, and many more. None of them has brought happiness or unity to American life.

We have become, says Mr. Frank, a nation of comfort seekers. We have worked hard; we have built a nation from the wilderness. Now we want rest. We started as hard seekers after power; we have become soft consumers of comfort. In physics the energy of motion has the tendency to become heat. In man the energy of Power flows into the need of comfort. But while heat

can be turned into motion again, comfort cannot be made into power. The lust for comfort does not make fresh power. The comfort-seekers become impotent and must depend on power for their comfort devices; and if the process goes on long enough power will cultivate a race so powerless that it will lack the means of even seeking comfort. To gain comfort we surround ourselves with comfort devices, and do not understand that comfort is an inner harmony and not a matter of gas stoves and bathtubs, and that a man may be more comfortable working with a pick and shovel than he is on a coil-spring mattress.

Yet out of the cults of power and the seeking for comfort, Mr. Frank can see a hope for the unifying of a people in America. The reasons for his hope are these: the peculiar energy of the American world, the instinct among Americans that they are not well, the loss of interest in cures and systems, the fact that the use of the machine has connected America and made it one nation, and the fact that it is in the blood of Americans to be captured by a high ideal.

America is an unstable land, a growing, unformed civilization, such as the Sargasso Sea that Mr. Brooks talked about. Many Americans see that power does not bring strength, that comfort does not bring ease, that a

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nation with money for its symbol will never have enough money. Americans are becoming more interested now in literature and art and psychology than in politics, law and economics. They have lost interest in the old systems, particularly in the system of constitutional law that seemed, up to Lincoln's day, to be the cure for all governmental wrongs. Because the machine has made America a close-knit nation its people are prepared to "behave as Americans, against the possible day when the term American will have been endowed with a creative value." And, finally, there is the hope that Americans can be captured by a high ideal, as they were captured by the ideal of freedom in 1776, and by other ideas in the years since then.

Mr. Mumford and Mr. Frank are idealists and optimists. They see hope for America—a better America. They do not think that the machine will dominate; Mr. Frank can even see good in the machine. He thinks that a group will arise in America to lead the nation to a fulfillment of human possibilities. Mr. Mumford feels that there is nothing to prevent our civilization from recovering its human base if people so desire. In both books the authors say that America started from a decay in Europe and that we may come out of our present submergence by the machine with new objectives.

In contrast to these men who think that America may advance into new fields of human accomplishment Mr. Paxson in *When the West Is Gone* points to the danger that the nation may be going back to the old European tradition from whence it came. He is chiefly interested in the frontier, in the type of man that the frontier developed, and in the results of frontier thinking on America. America has been an experiment in nationalism. No other country of recent history had the frontier to settle as America had, so that no other country developed the kind of attitude of mind that Americans have developed. The closing of the frontier has brought one era to an end and another to a beginning. The frontier conquered the immigrant; as he met the frontier he was changed into a new person. The pioneers were young, they were poor, they had hope. There has never been a situation in which more depended upon the physical and individual stamina of the man, and less upon birth, possessions, or education. Every man was equal if he had equal strength; upon the border there was equality of fact.

Out of the feeling of democracy came five rebellions. First was the revolt against England led by George Washington. The followers of Washington were pioneers, men of the frontier, changed by the frontier, so that they could no longer see the right of one man to

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rule another. It was the first triumph of the west over the east. But after the war was over the old colonial differences of rank survived; the older social systems of Europe were imitated. The new pioneers went west to the frontier of the Appalachians. They could see no value in such class distinctions, so that the second revolution was against the federalism of Washington. The Jeffersonian democracy was a democracy of frontiersmen, individualists who had no use for class distinctions, who were sure of the equality of all men. Again the west triumphed over the east.

The frontier moved on to the Mississippi Valley, but the spirit of the pioneer remained the same. He fought much the same conditions that shaped the followers of Washington, and this time, when he revolted, he sent Andrew Jackson to Washington on the third of the waves of liberal opinion.

The fourth rebellion of the frontier was in 1860 when the west formed a new party and elected Abraham Lincoln president. By that time there were four sections of the United States. Instead of the east and the west, there were the east, the middle west, the far west and the south. The far west was not the frontier, because it had been settled by gold seekers. The middle west was the home of the pioneers, the farmers, who found

life as hard as the early frontiersmen had found it, and who had developed the same kind of thinking in consequence. It was the middle west that sent Abraham Lincoln to Washington. It was the last successful revolt of the frontier against the older and more conservative forces of the east.

In November, 1896, another revolt of western liberalism broke out in open battle on the question of free silver. It was the fifth of the series of outbreaks for the rights of the commoner and liberal thought in America. Each of the other outbreaks had upset the balance of our politics and had installed new leaders. But in 1896 history did not repeat itself and the Populist movement, led by William Jennings Bryan, failed. William McKinley was elected to the presidency. It was the first time that a wave of liberal protest coming from the west had been defeated by the east. Since then there has been no new revolt of any consequence. The east is dominant over the west. It is the machine age over the pioneer spirit, a return to aristocracy, a turning back to Europe.

And Mr. Paxson asks if this failure is a sign that the human race is full grown, and if no more advance can be expected from it. Was what the frontier stood for in America merely a flash in the procession of humanity? Or was it a new beginning with permanent results for

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human happiness? He wonders what America will do with the question of capital and labor, and with the problems of international affairs. He does not believe that labor will ever form a class in America, because most workmen are Americans first and workmen after, and because none of them expects to remain a workman always. As long as the leaders of labor may rise to be the directors of capital there will not be serious labor difficulty. He does not believe that democracy is done for, or that, on the whole, there is any superior foundation for government and the social order than that of the common people who live within it. With the state of mind inherited from the frontier, America should be the nation to step forward to work out a world with a fair balance between national control and world fellowship, and bring about a universal justice built on law.





FIVE

AMERICA AT HOME

WHILE certain novelists had been interested with the contrast of America and Europe, there were many who were chiefly concerned with the nation at home. They had been stirred by the closing of the frontier, the standardization imposed on the country by the building of railroads, and later by national advertising, the mail order houses and the chain stores, and by moving pictures and radio. The disclosure of corrupt politics during the administration of President Grant had led them to discuss the practical workings of a democracy. Henry Adams in his anonymous novel, *Democracy* published in 1879, exposed the unscrupulousness of politicians and the defects of popular government from the point of view of a man who had an intimate knowledge of both. In 1925 Samuel Hopkins Adams wrote an exposure of conditions during the reign of President Harding in *Revelry* that was more vulgar, but just as effective.

Four years after *Democracy* John Hay wrote *The*

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Breadwinners, a novel that sounded the note of alarm at the increasing aggressiveness of organized labor. It was not a valuable contribution to the understanding of the industrial situation, but it did show that something was happening. Other writers had clearer visions of what that something was.

In 1893 the editors of *The Cosmopolitan*, *The Argosy*, and *Munsey's* reduced their prices and began to publish personal accounts of famous people and careful studies of social life in America. There was no deliberate plan to attack existing institutions, but the authors like Tarbell, Steffens, and Baker did take up the problems that interested people and discussed them intelligently.

With the publication of *A Hazard of New Fortunes* William Dean Howells, most important novelist of his day, took up the criticism of society, which he carried on until his death. Although he was too mild to cause as much disturbance as some of the others his influence on contemporary novelists was toward realism and the positive presentation of fact. Mark Twain showed his disgust with humanity as he saw it in the United States in *The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg*, and *The \$30,000 Bequest*.

Frank Norris, Upton Sinclair, and Jack London tried to picture the thing that was coming to pass and each

made violent attacks on the exploitation of the public by organized wealth. Each had a remedy to suggest. Mr. Sinclair is opposed to the present economic system, and from *The Jungle* to *Boston* has been against capitalism and for socialism. London recommended revolution as the only means of settling class differences. Norris looked forward to a vaguely millennial change when human fellowship would prevail.

Ernest Poole in *The Harbor* in 1915 wrote with a better understanding of the relationship between the capitalist, the engineer and the laborer. He dreamed of cooperation to some great end. Winston Churchill in *A Far Country* in 1915, and *The Dwelling Place of Light* in 1917 tried to say the same thing, that capital and labor are interdependent and must learn to work together.

The critics did not get a hearing as soon as the novelists, the poets, and the short story writers. For a long time after the Civil War, authors like Margaret Deland in the Old Chester tales, and Zona Gale in the Friendship Village stories built up a tradition of village honesty and sweetness. But the World War had its effect on them, so that shortly after its close Miss Gale was publishing *Miss Lulu Bett*, Mrs. Deland brought forth *The Vehement Flame*, and Booth Tarkington, who had previously been both sweet and light, wrote *Alice Adams*.

All of them gave pictures of village life that are more true than flattering.

As early as 1883, E. W. Howe wrote *The Story of a Country Town* and had to publish it himself because no other publisher thought that anyone would buy such bitter realism. Mr. Howe was the first to say that pioneer life did not leave nobility in its train, but rather shabbiness, poverty, and ugliness. Mr. and Mrs. Haldeman-Julius wrote in much the same strain in a novel with the suggestive title *Dust*. But neither of these books brought a turn of the tide from such romances as *When Knighthood Was in Flower* and *Alice of Old Vincennes*. It was a book of poetry that did it.

This was Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*, a series of short poems, self-composed epitaphs for the tombstones in an imaginary graveyard at Spoon River, a little town in central Illinois. They were attacked as bitter, cynical, godless, and untrue, mostly by people who did not understand them. But they were the final opening wedge for criticism of America in literature. Following Mr. Masters are any number of novelists, poets, and playwrights who criticise life in America. Many of them chose the small town as the background for their stories, but the criticism is of all American life. *Main Street* by Sinclair Lewis is perhaps the best known. It is a

vigorous indictment of the ignorance, stupidity, ugliness, and lack of any grace of manner or of heart that prevail in a small town. He followed it with *Babbitt*, a much better book because it had a real character for a hero. In *Arrowsmith* he repeated his charges against the American community, but here it is a larger city; in *Elmer Gantry* he returned to the accusation that the community which frustrates a good man rewards a charlatan.

All of this made part of the background that Mr. Brooks was anxious to create. The novelists made it possible for the critics to get a hearing. Since the World War the critics in America have tended to form two main groups. There are those who can see no good in America, even as there were novelists who could see nothing worthy in the life that they were presenting. They occupy themselves in showing that America started in the gutter and has proceeded to run into the sewer. They call attention loud and long to their belief that the worst of American life is due to her culture, that the best is an accident, and that there is no hope anywhere. The other group, usually older than the first, and if not wiser, at least quieter, concern themselves with showing that there have been some good things about the past, and that there may even be some hope for the future if some of the present corrupt tendencies can be overcome.

Civilization in the United States, an Inquiry by Thirty Americans published in 1922 is a complete index to the mind and emotions of the first group. *Recent Gains in American Civilization* published in 1928 took only fifteen "distinguished critics of contemporary life" to cover the field. The authors of the first book came together because of common interests and beliefs and decided to write a series of essays in order "to contribute a definite and tangible piece of work toward the advance of intellectual life in America. We wished to speak the truth as we saw it, in order to do our share in making a real civilization possible." In order to give the book unity and authority they decided to exclude any authors who were aliens, professional propagandists, or who were merely dissatisfied with American life for personal reasons. Then they laid on each of their contributors the injunction to refrain from mud-balls and vituperation—a bit of a problem for some of them, who, like Mr. Mencken and Mr. Nathan, make their living by tactics other than urbanity. To keep the book unified they decided on three major propositions: "First, that in almost every branch of American life there is a sharp dichotomy (meaning lack of unison) between preaching and practice; we do not let our right hand know what our left hand doeth. . . . Second, that whatever else American civilization is, it

is not Anglo-Saxon. . . . Third, that the most moving and pathetic fact in the social life of America today is emotional and aesthetic starvation." If these contentions seem a bit harsh, says the editor, there is nothing to be said except that the contributors were not trying to please anyone, but were attempting to understand clearly, and clearly to explain what they understood.

The essays are provocative of thought and emotion, no matter on which side of the controversy the reader stands. If he agrees, the pronouncements will sound like the words of the minor prophets. The Hebrews from Hosea to Malachi are no more pungently outspoken than are these American critics. "We must change our hearts," one of them cries, "for only so, unless through the humbling of calamity or scourge, can true art, and true religion, and true personality . . . grow up in America." However, if the reader is prepared to disagree he will feel the stir of old distastes for prejudices so often repeated. He will read with approval from Stuart Sherman that such talk is no more than a bid for notoriety. "I used to think that to insult the common sense, and always to speak contemptuously of the 'bourgeoisie' implied sycophancy, either to a corrupt and degenerate aristocracy, or to a peculiarly arrogant and atheistical lower class. But our 'democratic young people,' as you call them, preserve and

foster this artistic snobbishness as a form of self-expression.” This is not a book for the uninformed; there are too many opinions, all of them stated with the tone of final authority. The authors are not fools or rogues, although they may have foolish and roguish capacities. Probably the reader will feel as he reads them that these Minor Prophets are true to the type described by Edwin Arlington Robinson:

*“Who seem to carry branded on their foreheads
‘We are abstruse, but not quite so abstruse
As possibly the good Lord may have wished,
. . . . men who never quite confess
That Washington was great;—the kind of men
That everybody knows and always will,—
Shrewd, critical, facetious
And for the most part harmless, I’m afraid.”*

They came together in a series of fortnightly meetings for a winter, they engaged to speak the truth about their country “without sentimentality and without fear,” they were resolved to declare themselves with good temper and urbanity. It was a hard task. All of them could face the public fearlessly, but they wrote in the fear of each other. Some of the others might find them sentimental or cowardly! Terrible thought! So they proceeded sternly to the disagreeable job, and no matter how it hurt they found no good in any American thing. This part was

fairly simple; they told the awful truth fearlessly, but it was a harder matter to be sweet tempered and suave about it. Urbanity is not the natural manner of a prophet. Some of them, being a bit outside the circle, write with a natural geniality, but the inner circle fail to prove their editor's statement that "we are quite gay." In the end the laments rather overshadow the prophecies, and weariness overcomes the reader. Yet the insistence on restudying the past in America and re-examining the present in the light of it is much to the point.

H. L. Mencken writes about politics in his most pungent strain. To wit:

"If he (the politician) has genuine ability, it is a sort of an accident. If he is thoroughly honest, it is next door to a miracle. . . . They are, in the overwhelming main, shallow fellows, ignorant of the grave matters they deal with and too stupid to learn. . . . Examine him at leisure and you will find that he is incompetent and imbecile, and not only incompetent and imbecile, but also incurably dishonest. . . . His outlook, when it is honest, is commonly childish—and it is very seldom honest. . . . What they know of sound literature is what one may get out of McGuffey's Fifth Reader. What they know of political science is the nonsense preached in the chautauquas and on the stump. What they know of history is the childish stuff taught in

grammar schools. What they know of the arts and sciences—of all the great body of knowledge that is the chief intellectual baggage of modern man—is absolutely nothing.”

In his essay on *The City* Lewis Mumford writes a preliminary sketch for his later volume *Sticks and Stones*. John Macy deals with *Journalism* in an article showing that the newspaper in America is a reflection of the uniformity, the lack of individuality, of the people. The newspapers are as bad as can be, says he, but “The American press is an accurate gauge of the American mind.” The author of *The Law*, Zachariah Chafee, Jr., succeeds in achieving the urbanity that was the ideal of the group. He sees the reasons for the American distrust of law, and has some suggestions to make for reforming it, among them the appointment of a Minister of Justice.

Robert Morss Lovett writes on *Education* and gives a careful and penetrating analysis of his subject. He sees that the system of education in the United States is much like the system of the medieval church, and that now as it is turning away from the form brought from England it is uncertain of materials or method. He sees the value of the specialist to society, but doubts the value of specialization to the individual. He doubts, too, the

value of the increase of elective courses in universities and the emphasis on outlines rather than reading and studying the works of authors. He is of the opinion that education at present is for the purpose of producing belief rather than stimulating thought.

“Education is the propaganda department of the state and the existing social system. Its resolute insistence upon the essential rightness of things as they are, coupled with its modest promise to reform them if necessary, is the basis of the touching confidence with which it is received.”

There are reasons, however, that make him think that the old superstition is passing. Everywhere the educated are becoming more critical of the results of education, and people see too clearly the alliance between education and a social system depending on private capital. Education does not bring success in life, as everyone can see by looking at that educated class, the teachers. Then, too, the corrupt political practices connected with the schools are becoming too obvious, so that a reform must come. Mr. Lovett has two suggestions to make for the reform of education. First, it should surrender control of the school to the educators. Second, it should cease to claim that individual and social salvation lies in it. It should lay aside its pomps and ceremonies and its flattery to nationalistic and capitalistic ambitions.

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In his essay on *Scholarship and Criticism* Mr. J. E. Spingarn points out three things needed by American criticism today. First, education in aesthetic thinking; second, scholarship; third, a deeper sensibility. Clarence Britten finds little good to say about *School and College Life*. Frank More Colby sees that "there is no such thing as an American gift of humorous expression, that the sense of humor does not exist among our upper classes, especially our upper literary class, that in many respects almost every other civilized country in the world has more of it." There are articles on nerves, engineering, business, medicine, sex, the family, history, and numerous other subjects. The authors have taken all life for their province, and in general have found little to love in it.

The right wing of the discussion comes forward with their essays on *Recent Gains in American Civilization*. It is an interesting title, for the authors of all the chapters are all men and women well known for so-called radical tendencies. They are a group of schooled experts; the contents page lists such names as Charles A. Beard, Mary Austin, Norman Thomas, Rockwell Kent, Harry Emerson Fosdick, David Starr Jordan, and John Dewey. They were chosen because they were critics of the existing order. Says the editor, Kirby Page, in the foreword: "The chapters recording gains in the various areas have all been

written by men and women who were selected because they are thoroughly critical of the existing order and who, accordingly, are not likely to indulge in facile optimism.”

And they do not indulge in facile optimism; it is difficult for them at times to see any gains; all they can do is to count the losses and point out how much worse they might have been. Charles S. Johnson sees some gains in race relations, particularly as regards the negro. They are entering colleges with white students; they are finding places in art, music and literature; the taboo has been taken off the discussion about race relations; lynchings have become fewer; and he sees hope ahead. Norman Thomas sees an advance in the quest for peace in the recent removal of the glamor from war, and in the general feeling that something can be done to prevent war. However, he is not very hopeful of results for the immediate present. Oswald Garrison Villard sees hope for the American Press, although he can see no real gains. The schools of journalism and the recently formed Society of American Editors are steps in the right direction, according to Dallas Lore Sharp. Education has made a gain in the better organization of all the department of teaching: The National Educational Association, the National Council of the Teachers of English, and kindred organizations. Teaching is being fitted to the pupil

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instead of the pupil to the curriculum, and that is a great advance. There is much to be done, but, "I doubt if there is another two billion dollar enterprise, out of which we get so much for our money, one in which they are making more rapid and substantial gains, or one on which rests so securely the safety of the state and the happiness of the people." It is easy to see that here is the sober judgment of older men who are able to see the gains so clearly because they have seen so clearly the errors and the losses.

Three of the essays are especially interesting. Charles A. Beard writes on *Recent Gains in Government*, Harry Emerson Fosdick contributes the article on *Recent Gains in Religion*, and a summary of all the other chapters by John Dewey is placed at the end of the book and called *A Critique of American Civilization*. In the beginning Mr. Beard asks if the Congress of the United States is any better or any worse than it has been at any other time. Then he proceeds to answer the question by looking at other periods in the nation's history. Thomas Jefferson, he points out, thought that the members of the first congress were lining their pockets with gold, and his suspicions have been confirmed by recent investigations. Men have, he said, always compared our evil statesmen with men like Webster, Hayne, Clay,

and Calhoun. Granted that they were marvels of intelligence, statesmanship, and character, why did they leave the one fundamental problem of their age to be fought out on the battlefield? As to their character, he calls attention to the men who speculated in western lands while they were passing land legislation, and who were paid by the banks while they argued for bank laws in the legislature. He asks what significant measure of law and public policy any of the United States senates passed between 1870 and 1900? He comes to the conclusion that if the United States Congress is not doing wonders, at least it is doing as well as any previous congress did with problems that were not one hundredth part as complicated.

In the closing decades of the nineteenth century the liberals were demanding a graduated income tax shifting to wealth some of the burden of federal taxation, an inheritance tax, a postal savings system, woman suffrage, an interstate commerce commission with power to fix rates between states. In their day these reforms were denounced, called anarchistic, socialistic, an invasion of the rights of man, yet they have all been adopted. Perhaps all this was bad, but Mr. Beard contends "that more humane and democratic legislation running in the direction of greater economic justice has been put upon the

statute books of the United States during the past twenty-five years than during the hundred and ten years that elapsed between the founding of the federal government and the inauguration of Benjamin Harrison."

Against the scandals of Daugherty, Fall, Doheny, and Sinclair he places the Whisky Ring, the Black Friday Episode, and the Mulligan Letters. He sees that the government is offering more actual service to the people than it ever has before through the Children's Bureau, the Weather Bureau, the Forest Service, and hundreds of others like them. More money was spent in the far-off golden days to get elected to the United States Senate than in these days of general election and public exposures, only people then paid no attention to it. Public money is being spent more wisely, says Mr. Beard, since the budgeting system has come into use, and there is stricter accounting of expenditures. Streets are better paved, schools are better, a revolution has been brought about in municipal sanitation, and attempts are being made toward city planning. All of these gains have been brought about by the force of public opinion, which, he thinks, will be the cause of any other gains the nation may make.

Mr. Fosdick has a harder task to show the gains in religion because, as he points out, religion is in a badly muddled condition in the United States. He sees one

gain in the rapidity with which religious thought is being readjusted to the viewpoint of the modern world. A second gain is to be found in the fact that the nature of religion has become clearer and it has been freed from accessory entanglements. Never was it more plain that religion is forever rooted in human nature and will always mean devotion to the concrete spiritual values, goodness, truth, beauty, and love. Another great gain is the recognition on the part of men that religion does not depend on any creed, canon or system of theology, that it is a human experience that does not need organization to be effective to the individual.

But on the side of organization there are gains as well. The membership in Protestant churches in the United States between 1915 and 1925 increased slightly more rapidly than did the population. The movement toward church union is a hopeful sign. Other questions than faith in God and the application of Jesus' teaching to personal and social life have been thrown aside. And for these reasons Mr. Fosdick sees gains in religion in recent years, gains that he thinks will result in a renaissance of spiritual life in general and religious life in particular within the next century.

Mr. Dewey read eleven of the essays before he wrote his *A Critique of American Civilization*. It is a summary

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of them with an attempt to tell what it all will come to in the direction and quality of American life. He finds as he looks over American life a curious contradiction. In the public organized side of life there is a hardness, a standardization, a devotion to mechanical prosperity, what the critics of the other wing call the domination of the machine. But on the private or individual side there is an immense vitality. In the region of politics this conflict is evident in the fact that never have citizens seemed so indifferent to the corruption of high officials, never have they been so negligent about voting, yet at the same time there has never been so much exposure and investigating going on. It seems to mean that the American people have given up expecting the traditional political institutions to be of service, and are placing their hope on something more fundamental than politics. The forces of bigotry seem well organized and active, yet in 1928 for the first time a Roman Catholic was a candidate for president and his official opponents made no point of the religious issue. While freedom of speech seems to be a lost principle in public, in private there has never been so much self-examination and self-criticism. Publicly America is engaged in an imperial policy; privately her citizens are becoming internationally minded.

In regard to material progress Mr. Dewey is not so

hopeful. America has made living easy and comfortable, but Americans have not built any corresponding advances in religion, art or the graces of life on that material foundation. He finds that the nation does read better books on the whole, and that the widespread expansion of education is a gain. He believes not that America is merely a diluted Old World, but that Columbus did discover a new one with hope for the future.





SIX

THE HUBBUB OVER HUMANISM

BACK in 1915 Van Wyck Brooks called for debate about America, her ideals and her traditions, and her hope for the future. He got his response in the challenge to tradition led by Mr. Mencken, who gained the most listeners because he shouted the loudest; in the defence of tradition, led by Mr. Sherman, who spoke for the conservatives; in the attempts to reconsider America as an heir to Europe in the books of Lewis Mumford, Waldo Frank and Frederic Paxson; in the attempts to reevaluate America as it stands, by groups of younger critics. The concluding step is to note the special focus of discussion today on the New Humanism.

Although Mr. Sherman was the spokesman for the party of Culture and Tradition he had three important defects: He was not the first of the party in time, he was not the first in real authority, and he was not constant in his position. He spoke for them because he was able to get a hearing; he could sell copy because he had

a style that the public liked and would read. It was a controversial style, and the public always has liked a good fight, particularly if it was a vicious one and there was a chance of seeing one of the opponents hit below the belt.

The real leaders in the defence of tradition were three other men, Irving Babbitt, Paul Elmer More, and W. C. Brownell. They are all less popular in style, less journalistic than Mr. Sherman; therefore they were all overlooked for several years. But they went quietly on doing their work, publishing books that a few people read, until they were called to the front by the movement for humanism in 1929 and after.

These real leaders are now the men in popular esteem. While Mr. Mencken and Mr. Sherman were snarling at each other over Puritanism and naturalism, Mr. Babbitt, a professor at Harvard for thirty-five years was saying in his books, "Here is the issue. Consider it." He started in 1908 with *Literature and the American College*. In it he upheld the older classics which are the standards he wants to use in measuring modern literature. In *The New Laokoon* in 1910 he repeated that the issue is one of standards, balances, and control in American literature. He attacked Rousseau as undisciplined, uncultured, lacking in proper sense of proportion, in *Rousseau and Ro-*

manticism in 1914. In 1924 two other books *Masters of French Criticism* and *Democracy and Leadership* carried on the plea for fixed standards in ethics, art, criticism, and literature.

Paul Elmer More was first a teacher of Sanskrit and Classical Literature and then literary editor of the *Independent* and the *New York Evening Post*. Later, as editor of the *Nation*, he had an important influence on the criticism written in America. In 1904 he began the publication of the *Shelburne Essays*, named for the little town in New Hampshire where Mr. More lived when he began to write them. He left the editorship of the *Nation* in 1915. Since that he has devoted much of his time to writing *The Greek Tradition*, a five volume work on the relation of Greek philosophy to Christian thought. He is a frequent contributor to the magazines that have been taking part in the humanistic discussion, chiefly the *Bookman* and the *Forum*.

W. C. Brownell started in 1888 with the publication of *French Traits*. From then to the publication of *Standards* issued in 1917, *Democratic Distinction in America* and *The Spirit of Society* in 1927 he always insisted on high standards in art and literature. He died in 1928, but he had contributed much to the fight for the old tradition and to the cause of the humanists.

These three are the prophets of the present school of humanism. They carry on the work in America that Matthew Arnold started before them in England. They have their differences, which will be discussed later. Around them are a whole crowd of near-humanists, pseudo-humanists, and would-be humanists. But the time has come to answer the question everyone has been asking: "Just what is all this humanism we have been hearing so much about? What does it mean?"

And they are difficult questions to answer simply. It is no new "ism" that has just been invented to give the critics something new to quarrel over; it was always here. It is as old as the day Adam discovered that he was different from the animals that frolicked together in the Garden. Although in America the movement is young, humanism itself is not. It was a part of the ancient wisdom of Greece, Judea, India, and China. It was old by the time of the Renaissance, when the word began to be used. Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Confucius, Horace, Dante, Milton, Goethe, Matthew Arnold, Emerson, and Lowell, all were humanists. It is a part of the wisdom of any age that held that man was higher than the animals, near akin to God Himself.

"Yes," murmurs the gentle reader, "but what is it?"

Humanism is an attitude toward life. It is that attitude

which says: "I am a man with the power to control myself. I have the impulses of the brute, but I can direct and command those impulses. I am different from the dog at my knee because I have will-power. Inherent in me is all that is necessary for a complete man."

Humanism is the median between two extremes. On the one hand is naturalism, on the other is religion. The naturalist says: "Man is a physical organism. Everything that I do is determined by my body. The essential me is attached to it. It is all I can be absolutely sure of. All life is a matter of biology and chemistry. What I do is caused by chemical reactions." Some naturalists go even further. They claim that man is determined by his appetites—his lust for power, for sexual gratification, for domination. Naturalism in literature is apt to stress man as brute, as appetite only. That is what Theodore Dreiser does in his novels. *The Financier* is a story of the lust for the power of money, *The Genius* is a tale of the desire for fame, *The Titan* is a tale of the lust for domination over fellow men.

Religion is at the other extreme. The religionist says that man is wholly dependent on a supernatural power. That only in terms of that supernatural power can men write or enjoy literature, that there is an outside power to which man is entirely subject. The naturalist says

that man is flesh; the religionist says that man is spirit; the humanist says that man is mind and will controlling body, and perhaps influenced by spirit.

The humanists differ greatly in the place they give to religion in their definitions of humanism. Many of them say that man does not need the intervention of a god any more than an animal does. That he has within himself the ability to lead a balanced, controlled, poised life. They talk a great deal about dualism in humankind, the two sides of human nature, the side that is body and the side that is spirit.

In the early days of his writing Mr. Babbitt did not think that belief in God was at all essential to a belief in humanism. He said that religion need be added only if desired. In his essay, *Humanism: An Essay at Definition*, included in the volume *Humanism and America* published in 1930, he is more inclined to give religion a larger place. He says:

“Between the humanist and the authentic Christian, there is room for important co-operation. . . . One must admit an element of truth in the assertion of Plato that things human cannot be properly known without a previous insight into things divine. . . . For my own part, I range myself unhesitatingly on the side of the supernaturalists. Though I see no evidence that humanism is necessarily ineffective apart from dogmatic and revealed

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religion, there is, as it seems to me, evidence that it gains immensely in effectiveness when it has a background of religious insight.”

Mr. T. S. Eliot, poet and critic, is of the opinion that humanism cannot exist without religion. He is equally sure that religion cannot exist without humanism. He respects humanism without religion, but believes it to be sterile; while he thinks that religion without humanism produces vulgarities, political compromises, fanaticism, and bigotry. He argues for religion because of the emotional discipline it affords, which he believes can be found nowhere else. Mr. Paul Elmer More is more explicit. He argues that unless the humanists, of which he is one of the foremost, do not have the faith and hope of religion, they will sink back into naturalism. The forces of naturalism are too great, he says, to be successfully opposed unless man has the support of the supernatural.

When, back in 1915, the call to debate was issued, the answers were mostly attacks on the old traditions. The attackers dynamited the foundations of the old home, but they made no effort to supply blue prints for a new one. They said defiantly: “Man is an animal. Science has showed us that. Let us be natural. Let us do away with repressions, if we don’t we may go mad; Freud said so. Let us express ourselves. Morals have nothing to

do with biology and chemistry, and we are merely biochemical organisms.”

Naturalism came to mean license. People began to do openly the things that they had done secretly. They talked a great deal about self-expression without having anything much to express. Most of the young writers confused self-expression with sex expression in any case. Since sex had been a tabooed subject of conversation and of literature they wrote books about it. Sherwood Anderson, Ben Hecht, Floyd Dell, followed in the path of Theodore Dreiser. What they did not realize was that they would have written about any other forbidden subject with as much avidity. If eating—another physical necessity—had been a dangerous topic, we would have had books filled with food. It was not self-expression so much as it was revolt. And in the manner of any revolt against repression, it expressed itself in violence.

But the naturalists had nothing to offer in the way of joy, no way to happiness, nor beauty, nor even contentment. They could only give pessimism and an ever deepening sense of futility. Yet mankind is obsessed with the idea of the dignity of the human race. Why should we not be, when we have been taught for countless centuries that man is formed in the image of God? The naturalists stirred up Americans and made them think. If people agreed

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with them it was rather a new idea; if they disagreed, it was a theory to be opposed. In any case it took some thinking about. Out of that thinking will come something. It is too early to say just what, perhaps true religion. At the present time out of it has come humanism.

Humanism stands for controls, balances, standards of life. It would have man cultivate his humanity, those traits that make him different from other animals. It would have him cultivate poise by moderate and decorous living. It would have him normal, if the word can be defined. The humanists want a harmonious development of body, mind, and, in the case of the religious humanists, soul.

All great art, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the *Bible*, Shakespeare's plays, came from men who were humanists. The authors felt the dignity and worth of human life and wrote about it with restraint and beauty. In literature the humanists want to get back to those standards of balance, and control and loveliness that the naturalists left behind. This is the message that Mr. More, Mr. Babbitt, and Mr. Brownell have preached for years. The ideas are as old as the human race, and their strength is inherent in them.

Just now the humanists are losing their tempers over what they mean by humanism. And the enemies of

humanism are making capital out of the disagreements. Every humanist has his own ideas of what is in truth a rather abstract concept. In the midst of the great controversy with the naturalists there are little quarrels with fellow humanists. They need to define their cause. They are doing too much exploding and too little explaining. They would not have us confuse romanticism—the idea put forth by Rousseau that man was naturally good until the influences of civilization made him evil—with humanism. They do not believe in the natural goodness of man. If man were naturally good he would need no control, no balance. They are not altruists. They do not believe in service, nor in charity. They do believe that man has a will that can control his impulses. The early Puritans tried to discover if man had a will free from the will of God; then the naturalists argued that man did not have a will free from the impulses of his own body; now the humanists say that man has a will free to be controlled by his own mind. Failure to exercise this control they feel to be the greatest of evils. By using his imagination and his reason, Mr. Babbitt points out, a man may make for himself standards of right living or of good literature. Then he can use those standards to direct his emotions and desires. The goal of this control is to learn to like the right things. The humanists would have man

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obey all three of the ancient precepts: Know thyself. Control thyself. Deny thyself.

The humanists of America have come at a time that was ready for them. Just as people were a bit weary of the pleasant innocuousness of the decades since the Civil war and turned with relief to the excitement offered by the enemies of tradition and the propounders of naturalism, so they grew tired and a bit disgusted by too much of the new show. They turned with relief from reading unpleasant "slices of life" to the novels of Rafael Sabatini and the hair-raising detective tales of the Crime Club. Americans were hungry for romanticised crime in 1930 just as they were anxious for glorified war in the 1880's. There is no better proof that Americans as a whole are decent law-abiding people than this same demand for detective and crime fiction. People do not rush to read about the things they are themselves. It is because crime and mystery are so completely divorced from their lives that they find them romantic. Romance is the thing one isn't, it dwells in the land just beyond the horizon, it is always coming tomorrow.

The naturalists prepared the way for the humanists; the movement caught up with the three leaders of the movement and although Mr. Brownell was dead, Mr. More and Mr. Babbitt were at the height of their powers

and ready to lead the fight that they had so long waged almost alone. Fourteen of the humanists published a book, *Humanism in America*, in order to state their views. The same year, 1930, an answer was made in a symposium called *The Critique of Humanism* by thirteen opponents of their teachings. "Ours is the challenge of culture to the anarchy of our times," declare the authors of *Humanism in America*. "The keynote of the last decade was revolt, but it ended in bafflement and despair. Now we come to call you to order."

Lewis Trenchard More in his essay on "The Pretensions of Science" sees that the scientists have tried to reduce all the world to physical rule, but that even the physicists have found that there are bounds beyond which they cannot go. "Philosophy has demonstrated . . . that the mechanistic method can, at best, only picture an objective world as it seems to us, and not as it is. . . . The false pretensions of science must be wholly abandoned, and the problems of our destiny be examined by a wise judgment drawn from human experience, before we can hope for a sane and humanistic philosophy."

The two living leaders of the humanistic movement each contributes an article to the book. Mr. Babbitt writes: *Humanism: An Essay at Definition*, and Mr. More contributes *The Humility of Common Sense*.

Mr. Babbitt begins by explaining the origin of the term "humanism." It was first applied in the fifteenth century to the students who preferred the humanity of the great classic scholars to the excess of divinity in the medieval writers. They were encouraged by their studies to aim at an harmonious development of their faculties in this world rather than an other-worldly happiness. They saw that the world would be a better place if more persons made sure that they were human before setting out to be superhuman.

The reason for the clash between the humanist and the naturalist is, as Mr. Babbitt sees it, that the humanist requires a center to which he may refer all his manifold experiences, and this the outside world does not supply. He must apply to tradition for it, for tradition is the expression of the fixed ways in which men have agreed to conduct their lives. The naturalist fails to see the necessity for the poise and proportion that are at the base of humanism.

Mr. More urges common sense, so that people may see where some of the mechanistic theories of the universe have failed, and where the naturalistic writers are headed. The naturalists have showed that when the higher elements of man's nature have been suppressed, a lower instinct has taken its place, and at the last they have attempted

to "represent life as an unmitigated flux, which in practice, however it may be in literature, means confinement in the mad house." He is particularly aroused by the "stream of consciousness" method of James Joyce, just as Mr. Sherman was by the naturalism of Theodore Dreiser. "Art may be dehumanized," says Mr. More, "but only in the sense that, having passed beyond the representation of men as undifferentiated from animals, it undertakes to portray them as complete imbeciles. . . . I cannot imagine what lower level of imbecility may still be honored with the name of art." Here is language indeed fit for a Mencken.

Mr. Mather in his essay on the *Plight of Our Arts* is not hopeful. He sees that humanism may produce a sort of aristocracy which will foster the artist and provide a world in which the artist is not a tolerated alien, but solidly at home. As a professor at Princeton for years he has had his chance to watch the oncoming generation, so generously endowed with instruction in art, with open-mindedness, with audacity and hopefulness; but they give him no hope for the future of humanism. "They think life is so simple that they may ignore all the traditional solutions for its manifold problems, trusting to their own instincts of the moment to meet emergencies that have engaged the best wits of generations of sages and saints."

Harry Hayden Clark, professor of English at the University of Wisconsin, writes on *Pandora's Box in American Fiction* in one of the most interesting of the essays. In American literature there have been three hopes: first, the hope of a paradise of supernal beauty; second, the hope of an American paradise of nature; finally, the hope of a paradise within. To the first hope we are indebted for the work of Poe and James Branch Cabell; to the second hope, that of a physical paradise, we owe the miracles of machinery and science of America, and the literature such as the novels of Upton Sinclair which are social history rather than art. The third hope has not had results as yet, but Mr. Clark thinks that they may come with humanism. "Let us re-direct the joy-giving passion for creation through the matchless resources of the realm of the spirit. If both the rarest happiness and the rarest beauty are the fruit only of the hope of a paradise within, it would appear that American fiction would in the future be wise in dealing not with escape or the externalities but with the infinite variety and eternal mystery of the human soul's conflict between appetite and aspiration on its quest for an exalted inward happiness."

The book by the anti-humanists, *The Critique of Humanism*, spends no time in outlining a platform for

themselves; they devote their pages to bitter attacks on the humanists. Most of the names on the title page are not so well known, with the possible exception of Burton Rascoe, Lewis Mumford, and the editor, C. Hartley Grattan. One of them, Bernard Bandler II, has made contributions to both books. In the best manner of the controversialists they fling words like silly, reactionary, old-fogy, Puritan, hide-bound, and ridiculous, at the humanists. They could better have used some of the space in stating clearly what they did stand for rather than storming so petulantly at what they didn't approve.

The critics of America are many and their arguments are without end. What is a common person to believe? Is this nation going to turn into a great city where humanity is forgotten and only machines tended by unimportant chemical compounds—quaintly called in the old fashion, men—will survive? Or are men going to forget the ages of struggle they have made in order to become something higher than the beasts and in a few generations go back to the days before God saw fit to give the human animal a soul? Has it been for nothing that Socrates lived and thought, that Homer magnified the struggles of men into the meetings of heroes, or that another and greater taught gentleness and faith and kindness?

The common person who is not a critic cannot believe that any of those things will happen. He looks about him and sees that things may be bad, but he wonders if they haven't been bad more or less in every period of the world's history. Isn't it a difference of kind rather than degree? He sees his neighbors going about their daily work in a quiet orderly manner. He sits with others in his car waiting for the green signal light to flash and does not even consider trying to "go through" the red light, even though there are no cars coming from the other way and no policeman is in sight. He goes for a trip through the country using the hard roads that his taxes have helped to build, enjoying his own property. He stops to ask his way and is astonished to find how helpful and kindly strangers can be. He sees the lurid crime stories in the newspapers, but they appeal to him in much the same way that a good detective tale does. He doesn't think that it is the best of all possible worlds, but he knows that it is the best one he has, and it may get better in time. He'd do something to make it better if he knew just what to do. He doesn't worry very much about it; he has the garden to water when he gets home and the children want to go swimming.

People of America are seeing more and more clearly that the machines they have made do not make them

happy. More than that, the machines are taking away the dignity of human life. Eventually men will turn away from the thing that is dwarfing them. It is impossible for man ever to get outside his humanity; man must be the measure of all things on earth. True as have been the criticisms of America's educational system, it cannot be denied by anyone who is in it that of late the turn is to the development of personality and individuality. Children are given a choice of twenty subjects for study today where they had one fifty years ago. And the vast increase in school and college attendance in the last twenty years cannot but make for good in the end. When many people want something, that thing is bound to come to pass. The force of public desire is back of most of the changes in the world. Some day people are going to want things that are fine and true and beautiful, and they will get them. Labor saving devices are giving Americans more and more leisure. To use that leisure in the way pointed out by the naturalists would make a sickening orgy of life. Humanism may point the way to traditions of well-ordered existence, to beauty in life and in literature, to happiness in human hearts.

Of late optimism has come to mean, to the critics of the antihumanist group, a cowardly refusal to face the facts of life. And they seem to feel that the facts are

always bitter and heartbreaking ones, as if courage and kindness were not facts, as well as greed and cruelty. If one is to be in the latest intellectual fashion he must adopt a "healthy pessimism." He does not know that optimism and pessimism have to do, not with immediate worries, but with ultimate ends, and he hasn't gotten around to thinking about ultimate ends as yet. The "healthy pessimist" looks about him and makes the discovery that all is not right with the world—whereupon he raises a great hue and cry, not realizing that in the first two-thirds of recorded history the main social achievement, after a king and a priest had been provided, was the making up of a myth to account for human unhappiness. Pandora's Box, Adam and Eve, Prometheus, all are attempts at an explanation for the unhappiness of man. But the shock of the discovery of the world's misery is too much for the healthy pessimist; the times are out of joint, and he has no feeling that he was born to set them right. Rather he feels that it is his task to call attention to them. He is filled with disgust for childhood, laughter and sunlight, and with loathing for the optimist who, mistakenly, still has hope. He is angry at dullness and stupidity. He is irritated by the great majority of unthinking people who should be filled with despair, but who instead are having a pretty good time

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as long as their digestions function properly. And he has given voice to all these disgusts.

The tunes that the fiddles first played were strident pieces, full of discords, for the fiddlers were fighting the sentimentalism and moralism of the recent past. Now a new strain has crept in, a note of harmony and dignity. Time will tell if it is to be just a note, or if it is the motif for the symphony.



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