The American Background

From "America and Alfred Stieglitz," Twice a Year, 1934

They saw birds with rusty breasts and called them robins. Thus, from the start, an America of which they could have had no inkling drove the first settlers upon their past. They retreated for warmth and reassurance to something previously familiar. But at a cost. For what they saw were not robins. They were thrushes only vaguely resembling the rosy, daintier English bird. Larger, stronger, and in the evening of a wilder, lovelier song, actually here was something the newcomers had never in their lives before encountered. Blur. Confusion. A bird that beats with his wings and slows himself with his tail in landing.

The example is slight but enough properly to incline the understanding. Strange and difficult, the new continent induced a torsion in the spirits of the first settlers, tearing them between the old and the new. And at once a split occurred in that impetus which should have carried them forward as one into the dangerous realities of the future.

They found that they had not only left England but that they had arrived somewhere else: at a place whose pressing reality demanded not only a tremendous bodily devotion but as well, and more importunately, great powers of adaptability, a complete reconstruction of their most intimate cultural make-up, to accord with the new conditions. The most hesitated and turned back in their hearts at the first glance.

Meanwhile, nostalgically, erroneously, a robin.

IT IS CONCEIVABLE that a new language might have sprung up with the new spectacle and the new conditions, but even genius, if it existed, did not make one. It was an inability of the mind to function in the face of overwhelming odds, a retreat to safety, an immediate defensive organization of

whatever sort against the wilderness. As an emergency, the building up of such a front was necessary and understandable. But, if the falsity of the position is to be appreciated, what they did must be understood to have been a temporary expedient, permissible only while a new understanding was building.

Thus two cultural elements were left battling for supremacy, one looking toward Europe, necessitous but retrograde in its tendency—though not wholly so by any means—and the other forward-looking but under a shadow from the first. They constituted two great bands of effort, which it would take a Titan to bring together and weld into one again. Throughout the present chapter, the terms native and borrowed, related and unrelated, primary and secondary, will be used interchangeably to designate these two opposed split-offs from the full cultural force, and occasionally, in the same vein, true and false.

The English settlers, on the northeast coast, were those most concerned in this division of the attack, but it was they who would establish the predominant mode and its consequences. Further south—and it is important to note that it was to the south and in California, where the climate was milder, that this bolder phase of the colonization had its brief flowering—an attempt on a different scale was instituted. Under the Spanish the sixteenth-century universities, bishoprics and works of a like order, constituted a project diametrically opposed to what the English understood. What they seemed to have in mind was no colony at all, but within the folds of their religious hegemony an extension of Spain herself to the westward. But the difficulties were too great, too unimaginably novel to the grasp of their minds for them to succeed.

From geographic, biologic, political and economic causes, the Spanish conception ended in failure, and the slower, colder, more practical plan of lesser scope out of northern Europe prevailed. North America became, in great measure,

a colony of England, so to be regarded by the intellect and fashion of the day. While on the part of most of the colonists there would be a reciprocal attitude toward "home." The immediate cultural aspect, in dress, music, manners, soon developed a disdain for the local, as became a colony looking back toward fashion brought to it by its governors and copied in America wherever possible.

Nowhere is the antagonism of the times toward local initiative better shown than in *An Official Report on Virginia* (1671), by Governor Sir William Berkeley, when he wrote:

> I thank God there are no free schools or printing, and I hope we shall not have these hundred years, for learning has brought disobedience, and heresy, and sects into the world, and printing has divulged them, and libels against the best government. God keep us from both.

Alongside all this, nevertheless, an enterprise neither Spanish nor English, nor colonial by any way of speaking save in its difficulty and poverty of manner, began widely to form, a new reference by which knowledge and understanding would one day readjust themselves to a changing world. It was America itself which put up its head from the start—to thrive in mode of life, in character of institutions, in household equipment, in the speech, though opposed with might and main everywhere from the official party both at home and abroad. Noah Webster spent a life here building the radically subversive thesis which his dictionary represents. But the same force began pushing its way forward in any number of other forms also. Necessity drove it ahead. Unorthodox, it ran beside the politer usages of the day, never, except in the moment of a threatened national catastrophe, the Revolution, to be given a general sanction.

It was a harsh world the first men had to face. He who has seen the hill coming up from the waterfront at Plymouth, changed though it be from all possible resemblance to the

poverty of that day, will have no trouble for all that in imagining the bareness, the savage exposure, of those first isolated buildings regularly laid out either side the one climbing street. Merely to read the stone which commemorates the fifty per cent death rate of that first winter is enough to fasten the picture of tragedy on the mind. But just the bare statement in the chronicles of the necessity the people were under to bury their dead at night so as not to give the natives knowledge of their rapidly diminishing numbers while they waited for the ships to return, fastens the impression of terror and an alien mood toward the land upon the mind indelibly. And these things were repeated north and south in a hundred other instances.

The land was from the first antagonistic. The purpose must have been in major part not to be bound to it but to push back its obstructions before the invading amenities—to drive them before one. To force them back. That these transplanted men were at the same time pushing back a very necessary immediate knowledge of the land to be made theirs and that indeed all that they possessed and should henceforth be able to call their own was just this complexity of environment which killed them, could not become at once apparent.

Even the Revolution would prove anything but a united movement toward self-realization on the part of America. The colonists did not, except in their humbler parts, desire separation from the mother country—not in the beginning, at any rate. It took time for the national consciousness to make itself known, and against heavy odds. The significance of these old conflicts is often lost now, but valuable light arises in them again and again throughout the annals. The conflict existed strongly in the intimate nature of the Commander-in-Chief himself. He did not for more than a year after the beginning of the Revolution think of his action as anything but the protest of a loyal subject to his king. Not till after bitterest realization of disappointed hopes did the full

force of the thing break heavily upon him. It caused Washington a wrench not only of the heart but of the understanding itself to drag himself away from England.

The two divergent forces were steadily at work, one drawing the inhabitants back to the accustomed with its appeals to loyalty and the love of comfort, the other prodding them to face very often the tortures of the damned, working a new way into a doubtful future, calling for faith, courage and carelessness of spirit. It was, be it noted, an inner tension, a cultural dilemma, which was the cause of this. As corroborating evidence of which, note further that it was Thomas Jefferson, a man of delicate and curiously balanced mentality, not a soldier, who envisioned and drafted the Declaration of Independence. And that it was a practical man of unusual sagacity, Benjamin Franklin, who was the most persistent and successful exponent of the project to take into native hands and to deal directly, by force, if necessary, with the world of their time.

Washington's unique place in the history is that of the blameless leader, the great emblem, almost the unconscious emblazonment of the cause. As a soldier he was merely a servant. The other outstanding figure was John Adams, representing the relic obstinacy of the original Pilgrims.

The war over, the true situation, raised into relief by patriotic fervor, would flatten out as before into the persistent struggle between the raw new and the graciousness of an imposed cultural design. England eliminated, those very ones who opposed her would fast take the leading place in the scheme from which she had been driven, renewing the old struggle at home. The fashionable would still be fashionable, and the unfashionable, unfashionable as before.

In this inevitable conflict of interests, Thomas Jefferson stands out as the sole individual who seems to have had a clear understanding of what was taking place. He did appear to see the two trends and to make a conscious effort to embrace them and to draw them together into a whole. But

even for him, the disparity remained unbridgeable in his day. It was Jefferson who, when President, would walk to his office in the mud, out of principle, and walk home again ignoring the mud, as against the others who would ride. And at the same time it was Jefferson who, recognizing the imperious necessity for other loveliness to lay beside his own, such as it was, would inquire whether or not it might be possible, in securing a gardner, to get one who could at the same time play the flute. His home at Monticello, with its originality, good taste, with its distinctive local quality, is one of the few places where the two cultural strains approach in our history, where they consciously draw together. But Jefferson's idea would be sadly snowed under.

While it was destined that Jefferson should directly fail in propagating his cultural insights, it was at the same time the good fortune of Franklin indirectly to succeed.

Franklin, coming down from New England, saw things in a different way from that of Virginia. His talent, primarily technical, with the bearing which all technical matters have upon the immediate, took him quite apart from his will in the right direction. Though there seems always too much of the bumptious provincial in Franklin, he had the luck. For America has approached the cultural plateau from this necessitous technical side.

But with the beginners, facing difficulties, things did not go so well at first. America had to be before it could become effective—even in its own mind. Finding itself, as a democracy, unable to *take up* the moral and economic implications of its new conditions, which Jefferson lived and proposed, America slumped *back to* fashion on the one, favored, side, and, having slighted the difficult real, it fell back at the same time to unrelated, crazy rigidities and imbecilities of formal pattern, later to blossom as Dowieism, Billy-Sundayism, etc., etc., to say nothing of the older schisms over petty ritual of the same sort. Confusion, a leaderless mob, each wandering into a mire of its own—with perfect logic.

All this weight would one day have to be lifted in the final cultural pick-up still waiting—tremendous, neglected; a stone on the neck for the time being at least, it left Jefferson crushed.

When the first courageous drives toward a realistic occupation of America slackened, men like Boone, Crockett and Houston had to be accounted for. It is not hard to fabricate a melodramatic part for them. The hard thing to do is to make the understanding of what they were appear integral with the history, effective in a direct understanding, of what men have become today. Presented historically because of their picturesqueness or a legendary skill with a gun, actually the cultural place these men occupy is the significant one. And if it seems always easier to romanticize a thing than to understand it, it is so because very often it is more convenient to do so. Especially is this true when to romanticize a thing covers a significance which may be disturbing to a lying conscience.

For Boone, at least, was not a romantic, losing himself in the "mystery" of the forest. He was a technical genius of the woods, enjoying, in that respect, the admiration of the most skilful native craftsmen, who remained actually in awe of his sheer abilities and accomplishments. What was more cultured to him than the solitude of the trees? He was fiercely disdainful of the scrambling colonist, and ever more so as time went on.

The significance of Boone and of the others of his time and trade was that they abandoned touch with those along the coast, and their established references, and made contact with the intrinsic elements of an as yet unrealized material of which the new country was made. It is the actuality of their lives, and its tragic effect on them, which is illuminating.

All of them, when they did come back to the settlements, found themselves strangers. Houston, as late at Lincoln's time, lived apart from his neighbors, wearing a catskin vest, whittling a stick and thinking. But the reason underlying this

similarity of action in all of them is not that they were outmoded but rather defeated in a curious way which baffled them. Only Jackson carried the crudeness of his origins successfully up to the top by the luck of battle, and for a short time only. And when he did, as Ezra Pound has recently pointed out, it was Jackson who, because of his basic culture, was able first to smell out the growing fault and attack the evidence of a wrong tack having been taken, the beginning raid on public moneys by private groups, which he turned back for a few years.

Such men, right thinking, but prey to isolation by the forces surrounding them, became themselves foreigners—in their own country. They were disarmed by the success of their softer-living neighbors, a success which can now be marked as the growing influence of the false cultural trend. Actually Boone was a genius, lamed by the gigantic newness which won him but into which he could not penetrate far enough—it was impossible. At least he signalized rightly what was to be done. Such men had no way of making their realizations vocal. They themselves became part of the antagonistic wilderness against which the coastal settlements were battling. Their sadness alone survives. Many of them could hardly read. Their speech became crude. Their manners sometimes offensive. It was the penalty they had to pay.

It was a curious anomaly. They in themselves had achieved a culture, an adjustment to the conditions about them, which was of the first order, and which, at the same time, oddly cut them off from the others.

Even Washington, during a lifetime, was subject to the same torsion, and was extremely backward in adjustment to the growing laxity of his time, by virtue, be it said, of the actuality of this same backwoods training, which in his case did not last long enough to hold him entirely in its narrowing grasp. Another evidence of his great shrewdness. But, at the pinch, it was this which later stood him in good stead, though it caused him, at the same time, endless suffering. It

was powerful by its direct relation to actuality but remained heavily opposed by a more fashionable choice. Not he, but Roger Morris got the wealthy Mary Philipse.

It was precisely that which gave them their realistic grasp of situations and things which made these men unacceptable to their world of a rising cultural tide, gone astray, but of the sort which would predominate. Washington had all kinds of luck, quite apart from his character, to get through alive. He did manage to maintain himself intact, but only at the cost of a tremendous isolation, at a time of national stress which required the unique strength of moral base possessed by him, which came from a complexity of events in his birth and bringing up, and in which the others were lacking. But he was generously hated for it. All manner of intrigue dogged his steps in the attempt to break down his difficult standard.

His realization of what he was after came out one night when, on his way to West Point from Hartford, he passed through a small Connecticut town. The women and children came out with torches to cheer him and accompanied him a short distance on his way. This is the army, he said, that they will never conquer. It is easily conceivable that with less luck he could have been destroyed early, and the mud they threw at his carriage during his second term in the Presidency not have been counted among his laurels. He stood out because, like Boone, he stuck fast to facts which enforced his adherence above the glamour of an easier fortune. He was shrewd and powerful in other respects, but it was the unswerving moral integrity by which he clove to the actual conditions of his position which was at the bottom of his courage. It was the strength of a cultural adjustment of the first sort.

One is at liberty to guess what the pure American addition to world culture might have been if it had gone forward singly. But that is merely an academicism. Perhaps Tenochtitlan which Cortez destroyed held the key. That also is

beside the point, except that Tenochtitlan with its curious brilliance may still legitimately be kept alive in thought not as something which *could* have been preserved but as something which was actual and was destroyed.

One might go on to develop the point from this that the American addition to world culture will always be the "new," in opposition to an "old" represented by Europe. But that isn't satisfactory. What it is actually is something much deeper: a relation to the immediate conditions of the matter in hand, and a determination to assert them in opposition to all intermediate authority. Deep in the pattern of the newcomers' minds was impressed that conflict between present reliance on the prevalent conditions of place and the overriding of an unrelated authority. It is that which, at its best, comes like the cut of a knife through old sophistry—but it requires the skilful wielding of a sharp knife. And this requires a trained hand.

Not that this direct drive toward the new is a phenomenon distinctively confined to America: it is the growing edge in every culture. But the difficulties encountered in settling the new ground did make it a clearer necessity in America—or should have done so—clearer than it could have been shown to be otherwise or elsewhere. To Americans the effort to appraise the real through the maze of a cut-off and imposed culture from Europe has been a vivid task, if very often too great for their realizations. Thus the new and the real, hard to come at, are synonymous.

The abler spirits among the pioneers cut themselves off from the old at once and set to work with a will directly to know what was about them. It set out helter-skelter. And, by God, it was. Besides, it couldn't wait. Crudely authentic, the bulk of a real culture was being built up from that point. The direct attack they instituted, shown in many cases by no other results than the characters of the men and women themselves, was in many cases at least within reach of the

magnificent wish expressed in cries of wonder let out by Columbus' men on seeing the new world actually, for the first time, standing and running about before them.

At moments it flashes bewilderingly before people as reflected in the wild cries of the Paris crowds about Woodrow Wilson's carriage when he held up his hope of escape in 1918. But, unrealized in America itself, there too it slipped away again.

It isn't just to say that the acquisition of borrowed European culture was in itself a bad thing. It was, moreover, inevitable that it should be brought here. As inevitable as the buying of legislatures many years later in order that railroads might with the least possible delay be laid across the country. It is only unfortunate that this sort of thing should be taken to be virtue itself, a makeshift, really, in constant opposition to the work of those good minds which had the hardihood to do without it. The appurtenances of Europe came in with their language and habits, more finished than anything native could have been—that is, barring Indian workmanship and manner, which were of slight value in the East. As a matter of fact, these borrowed effects were better in quality than the native.

Samuel Butler's famous witticism, O God, O Montreal! is the sort of gibe the authentic crudeness had to weather at the start.

But while the men working toward the center were inventing their new tools of thought, welding their minds to new conformations with the situation as it existed, the men of the opposing force were in closer and closer touch with the Old World. By improvement of the means of transportation, the slow accumulation of goods, and the coming to the New World of more gentle types, these secured their hold more and more on the American cultural scene.

It was all right to say, as Poe did, speaking of writing, that we should cut ourselves loose from the lead strings of our British grandmama. He did so—to the confusion of critics

even to the present day—but few could follow him. And Charles Dickens could well reply by his well-known attack on American manners—his vituperation salted by astonishment before a strangeness he could not explain. Wider and wider the two bands of effort drew apart, the division which must inevitably have taken place signalized by the two more or less definite parties in American politics. And it was foreordained that the cleverer, more united, and more numerous unrelated element—represented by the cities along the seaboard—should have the ascendancy.

After the Revolution there would be a constant gnawing away of the State which, under the powerful influence of Washington and his associates, had been constructed. There would be an accelerated dropping back to style and the unrelated importations. Boone's lands would be stolen away from him by aid of unscrupulous land speculators with influence in Congress, and he would go off to Spanish territory around St. Louis in disgust of his race. It was not "culture" of either sort, to be sure, which drove him out, but it was under the necessities, the conditions, under the skirts of the borrowed lack of attachment, that the agencies throve which were his undoing.

Nor is this solely an American difficulty. It is seen in such things as the steady decay of life in the Shetland Islands, while the Faroes, less favorably situated to the north, too far for exploitation by the London markets, have begun a regeneration under a rediscovered genius of place. A like impetus is behind the bombing by a young and patriotic Breton of the memorial celebrating the absorption of Brittany by a greater France. The attempt of an unrelated culture upon a realistic genius of place is deeply involved in these events, as in the undying movement to free Ireland.

But in America the struggle was brilliant and acute. It was also on a vaster scale.

Many of us, who should know better, are quick to brand Americans with the term "colonial" if in a moment of irrita-

tion some Yankee stands up and wants to wipe out, let us say, French painting. In a loud voice he lets go: We can paint as well—or intend shortly to do so—as them damned frogs. We'll show 'em.

But there is a more persuasive phase to the feeling from which such an outburst might arise. It is this: The chief reason for existence cannot be but in the devising of excellence (or in destroying it, for it would be senseless to destroy the worthless) which is in effect evidence of the approach of equals. And though it is profitable to milk a cow and to use its milk (as well as its manure) it is quite as profitable in another way to talk with a man of sense and novel experience and to propose and carry out with him cultural projects. Especially is this delightful, or of value, when that man's outlook and background are new to us—by that much more in a way to cast a light on old errors of judgment.

In poverty and danger America borrowed, where it could, a culture—or at least the warmth of it ad interim. But this, valuable for the moment and later also as an attribute of fashion and wealth, fixed itself upon the mind until, the realization of the actual, original necessity being largely forgotten, it even went so far that Americans themselves no longer believed in it.

Meanwhile an unrelated Hopi ceremonial—unrelated, that is, except to the sand, the corn, the birds, the beasts, the periodic drought, and the mountain sights and colors—was living in the farther West.

A servile copying of Europe, not Jefferson's, became the rule. And along with it a snobbism from which or from the effects of which very few escaped. The secondary split-off from what, but for fear, had been a single impetus, finally focused itself as personal wealth in America, important since it is wealth that controls the mobility of a nation. But dangerous since by its control it can isolate and so render real values, in effect, impotent.

So, being held as a prerogative, wealth, by the influence it

wields, may become the chief cause of cultural stagnation. This has been the case in America. To support its own position it has sought to surround itself with the appurtenances of a finished culture which is of no direct significance in the new sphere. But by this emphasis such a culture of purchase, a culture in effigy, has become predominant. The harm is done. The primary cultural influence, embraced by the unfortunately impoverished native, came to a stop.

Wealth went on. The cities were its seat. By its centralization of money men flocked to them, leaving the already hard-pressed and often failing culture of immediate references still farther behind. The small cities and lesser communities involving nine-tenths of the population began to waste more and more. In many places life has actually disappeared—buildings being occupied only by chipmunks and porcupines. And these were once sources of energy, drained off by a cause not quite so simple as it has been imagined to be.

Certainly the trend must have been from poor land to good and from cheap lands toward the gold fields, the power sites, navigation centers, and the locations of natural resources of all sorts. Inevitably. One must accept the fact. But the pull exerted by tastes of a secondary order, involved in this rush to the cities, though unstoppable, may nevertheless be traced out and recorded. The cities had at least population and a quickened pulse, but in getting this, as in everything where the secondary culture predominates, the cost was severe. It involved the actual decay of the small community. And the decay of the small community was a primary cultural decay. It would seem as if the city has as its very being the raising of the cultural level, as if it were in the very stream of the great flow. Quite the opposite is true, unless the place of the city, as a sort of turntable and that only, be clearly realized.

The decay of the small community was an actual decay of culture; it was a sack by invisible troops, leaving destruction for which the gains—and they were considerable—did not compensate. It was a loss which degraded, which was com-

pelled by circumstances but which posited a return to sources in some form later on. The inevitable destruction of the South during the Civil War was of this order. It was the overwhelming desire for an immediate realization of wealth, for escape from isolation which made wealth paramount and to be fought for, at any cost. Wealth meant, as it means today, the control of movement, mobility, the power to come and go at will. In small communities, being drained of wealth by the demand for it in the cities, men died like rats caught in a trap. And their correctly aimed but crude and narrow beginnings died with them.

Take such a place as H——, Vermont, apart from the difficulties with the water supply—rotten and fallen into decay—inspiration, the full spirit, alone could ever have made it possible for men to live there. It is that something tremendously volatile and important has been withdrawn. Without attachment to an essential reality, nothing could have lived in these closed-off areas. And with it life can spring up in the very sand.

A related culture is a plant of such a sort. It spreads itself everywhere. But an unrelated culture is neither hardy nor prolific.

It was the reality of the small community which settled the territory in the first place, but from behind came the wave which blotted that out. And it was the culture of immediacy, the active strain, which has left every relic of value which survives today. It was a losing battle. Against an overwhelming mass superiority of wealth the struggles of a related culture grew still less and less. The very roots were being dried up.

Note well, that there is a hard law of the world which governs the emergence and disappearance of men as of communities and nations: To the victor belong the spoils. The cultural effects of America are governed by this as everything else is governed. Nothing is good because it is American, as nothing survives merely because it is authentic. The false

may and often does supersede it. But the law is operative, like every other law, only under definite conditions. These may be ascertained and measured. All that is being said is that it must be realized that men are driven to their fates by the quality of their beliefs. And that in America this has been the success of the unrelated, borrowed, the would-be universal culture which the afterwave has run to or imposed on men to impoverish them, if it has not actually disenfranchised their intelligences.

As the force of the crude but related beginnings faded away, for without money to make them mobile they stagnated, it nevertheless had some successes. The most effective drive of local realization came, as mentioned above, in practical inventiveness. Crude, at first, necessitous, immediate, hand-to-mouth, that was the first test. There it could not afford to wait on anything. It had to be cut and go.

And wealth took the scene, representative of a sort of squatter spirit, irresponsible because unrelated to the territory it overran. And wealth, in this temper, grew to be intolerant to the beginning culture it replaced. It seems strange that this mobility should have aligned itself as it did and shown itself antagonistic to the locally related. But being secondary and psychologically inferior to the first, the cause for the antagonism is plainly discernible. This psychological inferiority of position is reflected in the sordidness of much that was tolerated by the rich as time went on, as so well pointed out by Lincoln Steffens, in order to maintain themselves in their position.

It was the new, American phase of that same rule of wealth which "had adapted and converted the vast sources of power in nature to its own use and convenience, and which has exploited and perverted the course of religion and philosophic thought since the dawn of civilization." Particularly vicious was this in a democracy with the history which had been America's, since it was just that, as the note was set, which the first white men had come here to escape.

And still, men flocked to the cities.

Against this heavy tide, the real cultural forms might take on an unconscious beauty of refinement in the lines of fast ships and, in more conscious form, the carved and painted figureheads of the ships themselves. It might produce glassware, such collectors' items as the wooden marriage chests of Pennsylvania workmanship, an architecture old and new, and many other things as well exemplified as anywhere by the furniture in white pine and other native woods built by the Shakers in their colonies along the New York–Connecticut border. Beautiful examples are these of what could be done by working in a related manner with the materials in hand; they are plastically the most truthful monuments to the sincerity of the motives that produced them that could well be imagined. Here was a sect, isolated by their beliefs, living in small self-sufficient communities, seeking to make what they needed out of what they had for the quiet and disciplined life they sought. It was a bigoted, small life, closing in of themselves for a purpose, but it was simple and inoffensive. All these qualities appear in the workmanship, a kind of gentle parable to the times. To no purpose. It was vitally necessary that wealth should accumulate. It did. It couldn't help it. The consequences were persistent and unfortunate. And the strategy of fashion, partisans of the colonial spirit, had to be to keep the locally related in a secondary place. They needed art and culture, and the art and culture they fostered, and paid for, major in quantity, overshadowed the often defective and ineffectual new.

And there it was. The insecurity all men felt in the predominance of this purchased culture, unrelated to the new conditions, made them rush for security in money all the more. With these consequences: the abandonment of the primary effort and the further and further concentration of population at the trade centers, the cities, and the steady depletion of the rural districts.

It is in character that Washington with his sense of reality had an instinct away from them to his "vine and fig tree"—though he shared equally with the others, it must be said, the common lust for money and the security it could buy.

Men went to the cities, correctly, not even for the cash directly so much as because of the growing spiritual impoverishment of the outlying districts, a breakdown which brought a moral breakdown in its train. How could it be otherwise? The actual, the necessity for dealing with a condition as it existed, seemed to become unnecessary because of mystical powers represented by money. Decay must, therefore, immediately have got in motion among the faculties which fastened the pioneer to his world.

And the agent serving this colossal appetite for wealth, what has come to be known as "the law," became in fact the index of the moral corruption of the time, actually not the law, but a professional class of law-breakers. In Lincoln Steffens' autobiography, the structure of this moral decay is laid bare in its childlike simplicity: the economic, the military, the political masters at the top—all who were in power swept up by the predominant, unrelated culture they had been practicing. It grew, a great snowball rolling them up together, minister and financier, senator and college teacher, woman and man, young and old—fashion and cash. But being unrelated, having no basis in the conditions of the place, it had to have power by other means, and it had to have it quickly.

Museums were founded. Country estates, operas founded. And in the "generosity" of their gifts this series of generations believed they offered an excuse for their actions. The baleful architecture of certain of the years might have made them think, but it appears not to have done so. Religion became a stencil which roused many a man to a pitch of hatred against the form and repetitious stupidity of it, that would never be eradicated from his nature thereafter.

But those, at the top, possessing cash, and so retaining their enviable mobility, relied on the lawyer-politician-officeholder or professional intermediary as the means to keep them there.

It is clear that the racketeer, the hired assassin, the confirmed perjurer, the non-office-holding boss, is the same person as the higher agent of the class holding the money, who by their cash in turn keep the whole range of false cultural agencies in line. Money being power and the power to move at will, it has always been the prime agent of decay in the world. But in America, whose resources made Golconda look like a copper penny, it would run, a fire through the grass, more wildly than anything the world had ever seen before. The organization of the underworld would be exactly the replica, the true picture, of the national government—until finally they fused actually into one in the early years of the century, unabashed.

Incredible, fairy-tale-like, even offensively perverse as it may seem, it is the fear, the cowardice, the inability before the new, which in America whipped the destructive false current on like a forest fire. And, though it is not easily to be believed, it is a sense of their inferior position which drove the early fortunes on to their exorbitant excesses.

A board of directors of a great national corporation which has been using a man's patent illegally for ten years owes him two million dollars in back royalties. He institutes suit against them. He, one man without money. But in this case there are incriminating letters on file in the Department of Justice. Now. These letters may be destroyed if someone in Washington can be fixed. The man may possibly be bluffed out of a realization of his aspirations, or a feeling of futility toward his quest may unhorse him. Or he may be murdered, if posible, "accidentally." There's the setup. And the law has devised for itself an immunity so that it may with perfect impunity "legally" serve not only the corporate ruler himself but his servants and imitators all down the line to the lowest crook, even to the point of such technical minutiae of up-

setting a verdict as that one of the jurors is slightly hard of hearing.

And such instruments do, very certainly, hold the awed admiration of the sheep en masse, who wish they also could be sure of, be able to pay for, such a friend as the law in time of need.

The influence of a primary culture went on diminishing, save by moments through the work of a Whitman or a Poe; and there were clipper ships leading the race for trade around the world—and in the back yards of their masters and crews, a refined school of literary borrowers looking gracefully askance at Melville.

Andrew Jackson took up his battle with the banks, which by that time had gradually succeeded in diverting every nickel of the government's funds into their private coffers. And three-quarters of a century later, Woodrow Wilson would still be making statements relative to the menace to government of a vast and illusory credit power.

And still somewhat later, money was being consciously thrown away to known bankrupts, Brazil, Peru, and the German Reich, for the sole apparent purpose of impoverishing the region in which the bankers happened to maintain their traffic. Dizzily they conceded credits to allied corporate interests, at the same time calling small loans in order to pinch out the individual borrower, thus intrenching themselves in the monopoly and impoverishing the little man more and more till he should leave the field or take less and less in wages.

But this ascendancy of a secondary culture, secure in wealth, was gained not without results that were ludicrous as well as tragic. Wealth established museums, but it could not tell, it had to be told, what was good in them. Nor can it do anything with the treasures of the ages but stand by, while the primary forces employ them with taste, understanding, and, it may be finally, with power. There were the Boni de Castellanes, the tiara age of American opera, boxholders

sleeping through the music or wondering what the hell it was all about, while the American composer, Ives, remained unknown.

And nowhere better than in the case of Ives is shown the typical effects of this neglect: witness phenomenally intelligent and original conceptions, never fully oriented and worked out for lack of the necessary orchestra to work with; recognition first abroad, but a recognition tempered by the palpable deficiencies in finish bred of the inimicable atmosphere in which the work of a lifetime was spent; effects on his character the product of a pitiless isolation, his designation as an eccentric—a typical American retort to the castigations genius ends by applying to its compatriots—and finally a retirement from the encounter with mountains of unfinished and half-finished projects, in which the young of the next generation find "marvelous bits," the work of a man "way ahead of Europe in his time."

At the same time a whole world of successful musicians is carefully quarreled over, as to this or that quality they do or do not possess or would possess—wholly second-rate, therefore not dangerous, and so acceptable to the ever-present villainy in power. As a postlude Ives's compositions are occasionally performed in cheap auditoriums to the real audiences, potentially at least appreciative—but too late.

It is not to be gathered from this that first-rate work would be set aside for inadequacies merely because of a name. Because a thing is American or related to the immediate conditions it is not therefore to be preferred to the finished product of another culture. One merely presumes that in a flight of the intelligence the actual body passes through various climates and zones of understanding which are variable. It does not simply arrive at the destination by virtue of wishes and good intentions. And in passing from one place to another it is changed by that which it encounters. It does not just go and encounter nothing. If it did, there would be no use in going, for it would be the same there as here. It is a

question of give and take. If there is no equation, no comparable value to be set beside the first, adding or subtracting, multiplying or dividing, the thing stands alone and must stand impotent. America might produce work of value to Europe.

And on the other hand, one does not disguise one's poverty by enhancing one's appearance through the use of another's spiritual favors.

Even an Emerson did not entirely escape, his genius as a poet remaining too often circumscribed by a slightly hackneyed gentility. He did not relate himself so well to the underlying necessity as his style shows him to have been related to the style of the essayists of the older culture—running counter to a world exploding around him. Only at moments did his vigor break through. His formal thought did not set a sufficiently labile mold for his great vigor. It leads one to suspect that, but for this, he might have broken through to an astonishing brilliance actually close to him. He must have written essays of secondary importance, since the correlation of his effort was with the effulgence of other places and times whose direct connection with an actual he could not realize. The wrenchings of fate at his elbow, occupation with which would have put him beside the older efforts on a first-rate, if cruder, basis, he avoided or missed by rising superior to them into a world of thought which he believed to be universal only because he couldn't see whence it had arisen. It had a ground, all must, but it was not his, while his remained neglected.

He was a poet, in the making, lost. His spiritual assertions were intended to be basic, but they had not—and they have not today—the authenticity of Emily Dickinson's unrhymes. And she was of the same school, rebelliously.

It is impressive to experience the reflection of the American dearth in culture among women. Talk to her, to begin with, and see the panorama of her desires. Take the one who is tall, alert, and anonymous. They lead her to incompletions.

What is there for her to do outside a pioneer's lot, children, and the sentimentalization of the term "mother"? Loving her and watching her, one sees ghostly figures moving in that curious sexual brilliance. She will listen avidly to the talk of a province, a cultural continent, which men usually think to usurp to themselves. She will love only fully the man who takes her there, where she sees—a life fascinating to her.

They love best where the drink a man offers is of the rarest, and this is the mirror to be used.

But who can blame them for turning to Paris or Britain if they can? Or to someone with at least manners, if only professional manners, Hollywood brand or as it may be. Married, they look, stop, and wish for a paid dance partner. It is one more evidence, though a left-handed one, of the general lack. Is it perhaps a cultural lag in women—or an alertness to the cultural necessity about them by which, for their purposes, they search out the rare men? Mothers wish their sons to be instructed, as fathers that their daughters be beautiful.

On a broker's yacht, as a substitute, drunk in self-defense, what else is there to do but jump overboard?—and be found two days later in the surf—off Coney Island. They have at least experienced what is termed "action," a thorough trial of excitation of a sort. And this may be taken up out of arithmetic into algebra, seldom higher into any very interesting complications. Mostly dullness and the accidents common to all fillgap—the shells and casings to be towed out to sea and dumped.

What have we to offer compared to the effective friendship between Marcel Proust and the Comtesse de Noailles? A few selected suicides.

The ordinary, and I mean extremely ordinary, answer of what would pass for refinement, in the sense that metal is refined out of muck, is inaction with a taste for the draperies of thought. The basis of the impasse is ignored. But without an understanding of the structural difficulties underlying the

anticipated pleasure, even poetry might as well be taken in the vulgar sense.

It is seldom realized that what has been borrowed has arisen in a direct necessity, just as the real culture of America must also arise there and that it had a person and a set of circumstances it was made to fit. It fits the new man under other conditions as any borrowed clothes might fit someone of a different weight or complexion from him for whom they were originally intended.

The burning need of a culture is not a choice to be made or not made, voluntarily, any more than it can be satisfied by loans. It has to be where it arises, or everything related to the life there ceases. It isn't a thing: it's an act. If it stands still, it is dead. It is the realization of the qualities of a place in relation to the life which occupies it; embracing everything involved, climate, geographic position, relative size, history, other cultures—as well as the character of its sands, flowers, minerals and the condition of knowledge within its borders. It is the act of lifting these things into an ordered and utilized whole which is culture. It isn't something left over afterward. That is the record only. The act is the thing. It can't be escaped or avoided if life is to go on. It is in the fullest sense that which is fit.

The thing that Americans never seem to see is that French painting, as an example of what is meant, is related to its own definite tradition, in its own environment and general history (which, it is true, we partly share), and which, when they have done with some one moment of it and have moved on to something else, they fatly sell where they can—to us, in short. And that American painting, to be of value, must have comparable relationships in its own tradition, thus *only* to attain classic proportions.

And as for the helpful critics, their cataractous eyes are filled with classic mud.

But you can't quite kill the love of the actual which under-

lies all American enjoyment. The stage-tricked, waylaid, cheated sucker will yet come to post. When the cheapness of commercial lying is penetrated and something for a moment shows true, grotesque perhaps also, it will always be that which Americans will find amusing: Wintergreen for President; Ben Blue standing indolently and in a storm of wild music making circles in the air with his finger to caricature the violent exertions of Russian dancing. Or as the orchestra plays, to start a fight which ends in the musicians, one and all, smashing their instruments over each other's heads. However, it is the *pathetic* charm of the cowboy which makes him attractive and of use to the movie scenario and the rodeo.

To many writers the great disappointment of the years just after the war was that Amy Lowell, while sensing the enterprise of a reawakened local consciousness, touched it so half-heartedly and did so little to signal plainly the objective. Much could have been accomplished by aid of what seemed to be her great prestige. Pound, defeated at home, did far better, in reverse, from abroad. The best Amy Lowell had to offer was to say, at ease, that the iron of poverty had better be sunk into the generation's hides, and they'd be the better for it, as witness Villon and some others. Very good. But that is no excuse for a failure fully to realize and to state the project and its conditions.

We have an excellent and highly endowed hospital in the metropolis for dogs and an attractive canine cemetery in the suburbs. There are capital yachts and private vessels for transoceanic travel, airplanes, and flying heroes, de luxe cars, princely estates in the West where liberal barbecues are the fashion, and in the East as well, museums, collections and the patronage of swanky Old Masters, horses, racing—Palm Beach and the abandon of an occasional war for profit: even expensive universities for the propagation of something that passes for the arts. But for the rapid pick-up of clear, immediately related thought (as far as the conscious realization of necessary cultural forms shall go), shove the iron into them.

The slow, foot-weary ascent goes on. And this painstaking construction from the ground up, this Alexander's bridge, does *not* imply lack of appreciation for the French by native artists handling their own materials, but on the contrary, the deepest appreciation for them and the marvels they have performed.

Witness again the extraordinary dullness and sloth of the official preceptors as represented, let's say, by the heads of the cultural departments, the English Departments in the lead, in the American universities. The tremendous opportunities under their noses have not attracted them. One would think that the Physics Department alone under the same roof might have given an inkling of the revolutions in theory and practice that had taken place during the last hundred years, the fundamental, immediate nature of the investigations necessary, on the ground, and that this would have started them thinking and into action. Instead, they have continued to mull over the old records, gallivanting back and forth upon the trodden-out tracks of past initiative, in a daze of subserviency and impotence.

Subserviency is the correct term; for the power of wealth, which by endowments makes the university and its faculty possible, at the same time keeps that power, by control of salaries and trustees' votes, in order to dictate what those who teach must and must not say. And the teachers submit to it. And thus the higher is suborned by the lower branch of the cultural split-off, another evidence of how the coercion is applied. The teachers must not venture. Thus they lie, except again in technological branches, the good fortune of those spiritual descendants of Ben Franklin, gelded.

In the same sense, for writers, the official magazines have been a positive plague.

The truly pathetic spectacle of Frank Munsey leaving his money, which he made by capitalizing writers, to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, while the difficulties of a local realization were so patently evident in the difficulty of getting

valuable books published, etc., etc., was a gesture to knock 'em cold. Maybe he had an idea that that was the best way to dispose of the stuff, the best way to forward indigenous effort—by his contempt for it. In any case, Stieglitz didn't feel that way—in his sphere. Realizing the fullness and color in French painting—certainly one of the delights of the modern world—he went directly to work, a real act of praise, by striving to push forward something that would be or that was comparable in America.

Over and over again it must be repeated: none can afford to ignore, or to forget, or to fail to have seen, at least for the single glance, the superb wealth of, say, a Morgan collection. Its illuminated manuscripts alone, dating from the fifth century, must make us humble and raise our aspirations to the heights. But neither can a region afford not to have lived. It must be understood, while we are looking, that great art, in all its significance and implications, in all its direct application to our moment, has used great wealth merely as an instrument, and that the life and vigor of every primary culture is its real reason for being.

Those who appeared to have or did have the opportunity to forward a true cultural effectiveness in America have too often, backed by constituted authority, neglected it—being content, if anything, to push their personal programs exclusively. While these others who had the vision lacked the opportunity, through official neglect, to establish the basic program.

Not Alfred Stieglitz. Using his own art, photography, he still, by writing, by patronage, by propaganda and unstinted friendship, carried the fullest load forward. The photographic camera and what it could do were peculiarly well suited to a place where the immediate and the actual were under official neglect. Stieglitz inaugurated an era based solidly on a correct understanding of the cultural relationships; but the difficulties he encountered both from within and without were colossal. He fought them clear-sightedly.

The effect of his life and work has been to bend together and fuse, against whatever resistance, the split forces of the two necessary cultural groups: (1) the local effort, well understood in defined detail and (2) the forces from the outside.