

expression in works of art themselves. The tentatives are promising, seven or eight people make them; but still, aside from Jackson Pollock, nothing has really been accomplished as yet. The difficulty remains our failure to relate this high conception of contemporary art to our own lives, our inability to be detached about either art or life, detached and whole as people are who are at home in the world of culture. What we have instead is the ferocious struggle to be a genius, which involves the artists downtown even more than the others. The foreseeable result will be a collection of *peintres maudits*—who are already replacing the *poètes maudits* in Greenwich Village. Alas, the future of American art depends on them. That it should is fitting but sad. Their isolation is inconceivable, crushing, unbroken, damning. That anyone can produce art on a respectable level in this situation is highly improbable. What can fifty do against a hundred and forty million?

NOTES ON BEING AN AMERICAN

WILLIAM BARRETT

'It is a difficult thing to be an American,' said Archibald MacLeish, somewhere around 1929 if I remember rightly, a good while before he had discovered how easy it is to be an Under-Secretary of State. The American who tries to grasp his nationality is inevitably thrown into a peculiarly personal venture: part of the meaning of this nationality seems to be that each American, if he puts the question at all, has to explore his own personal relation to the American fate. This is not the case for the young Frenchman, even now when the French tradition seems to stand at a moment of strange crisis in France; his tradition is there, known and articulated, and he may place himself in one or other direct relation to it, even that of violent rejection. And I imagine this is also true, though to a lesser degree, for the young Englishman. But the American confronts something much more indefinite and amorphous; something which exists, certainly, otherwise how should he be so persistently haunted by its challenges and opportunities; but which, just as certainly, is not yet defined, and to that extent does not yet quite exist but has to be made, and so

may never be brought to exist at all; so that the American imagination, otherwise so young and innocent, has been persistently haunted by these darker shadows of possible failure, extravagant waste, final abortiveness.

This is my excuse for the personal character of these notes. If I put the question to myself 'What it means to be an American', I can think off-hand of five or six different answers that would have to be made by various persons I know; and I am therefore forced to seek my own; and if I tried to abstract altogether from the personal, the question would become much too general and academic for me, requiring a profound scholarship in American literature that I do not possess, so that I could hardly face its answer with any degree of excitement or conviction. But however personal these notes, I hope I am speaking not merely for myself, but for a real group in American life; perhaps, in some parts of what I shall say, a group more numerous than I imagine, though as yet largely inarticulate; and if, so far as it is articulate, this group is very small and in constant danger of being submerged under the more violent currents of American life, it may nevertheless become one of the most important in America; which may be saying no more than that I have already identified my own fortunes with it.

I. RE-DISCOVERY OF AMERICA

This was not a discovery that I could have personally contrived: I should not like to fake another one of those faked 're-discoveries' of America that fed the nationalist appetite during the last ten years; this was the shock of recognition forced upon thousands of other Americans: nothing less than the return from abroad at the end of the war. We shall none of us ever be the same again—let us hope. I see it, however, from the purely personal perspective of one tiny incident that set the frame for my return.

The plane bringing me (and some twenty other slightly war-weary Americans) back from Naples was grounded by bad weather at Tunis; there was the problem of killing time for that day; the seedy, mud-stained city seemed to offer nothing, so I borrowed a car and drove out to the ancient site of Carthage.

But this was the end of the war for me, and so full of the reverberations of that departing thunder, that I had better prepare the scene a little. . . .

It was during the war, 4,000 miles from home, that I really

began to discover America. Strange that the spectacle of the American G.I. roaming battered Europe should have awakened the memory of Henry James! But it did, and what I saw was the old Jamesian contrast between American innocence and European worldliness; no matter that innocence does not mean goodness, and that many, far too many, of these soldiers, in moments of drunken exigency, or through the temporary dissolution of character from homesickness amid this foreign corruption, traded on the black market ('They have to get drunk', one Italian remarked to me, 'because they are afraid to make love'); and no matter that a great many of them were first, second or third generation immigrants: something vague, but very real, called the American character, had set its mark upon them; made them taller, broader, reshaped their once-European faces, left them more boisterous, violent, insensitive; but also more open and less cunning—and possibly therefore less intelligent. It was quite a jolt for me to be saluted in certain foreign circles as being 'so American'; and though I knew the people who said this could not see the way in which I may, or may not, differ from a Mid-western farmboy, nevertheless I had to recognize that they were, in fact, perceiving some common characteristic that united all of us, the new and quite un-Jamesian ambassadors roaming Europe.

Anyone who has grown up in New York without very much money will have experienced a neighbourhood where one was still labelled by the nationality of one's immigrant forebears, and consequently thought of oneself in such terms before thinking that one was particularly American. We would naturally say of this or that boy: 'He is Italian, or Polish, or Irish; or, more simply, he is a Jew'—as if our young minds already grasped that the destiny and virtue of the Jew is to be an international figure. We were all American, of course; at school we sang 'America!' at General Assembly; but being an American was something that came after one's other nationality, still to be acquired and learned as our parents or grandparents off the boat had had to learn and acquire it. Thus the suffering of my childhood was to be 'Irish' in an almost completely 'Italian' neighbourhood.

We also grew up during the debunking of America in the twenties. If we were too young to read Mencken's onslaughts, they must have been in the air, for when I first became conscious,

somewhere around 1929, the contempt for America as a barbarous country, and the exaltation of civilized Europe, was already a settled attitude, which most of my friends seemed to share as a matter of course.

Sooner or later, the expatriated sensibility had to come to an end. The expatriates had to come home, the Depression left them no money to live in Europe; and they were thrown back upon America, which, in the grip of its economic crisis, revealed such a ferment of poverty and social conflict that the literary imagination could look here for a new sustenance. The rise of Fascism was the beginning of the long European defeat that culminated in World War II and eliminated Europe as a permanent cultural recourse. But apart from any or all particular causes, the American writer had sooner or later to come to terms with America: Van Wyck Brooks and *The Seven Arts* had already understood this in 1915, when they announced the period of 'America's Coming of Age'. Brooks went on developing during the 'twenties and 'thirties until he had evolved his present brand of literary nationalism, which seems usable to nobody but landscape committees. Perhaps we were not aware how the tide was slowly turning until the first full flood of nationalism burst upon us with the war. We had not failed to notice, of course, how projects for American literary studies were becoming something of a racket; 'people of whom we thought very little were turning up with opulent grants to study Thomas Jefferson (the American Leonardo, or was that Samuel Morse?), the Adamses, and the rest of the sacred names. As the youthful intellectual proletariat of the Depression, we had learned to scoff at everything, and we naturally made jokes about this new trend; but what we had not yet faced up to was the problem of defining ourselves which this new literary nationalism had forced upon us.

Then the war was already upon us, and the experience of European Man reduced to his extreme situations. When we walked among the ruins and felt like weeping; and just because we walked among them and knew we were not chained to them, we also knew we were Americans: free from these ruins for that possibility of self-definition, which has always been the real historical meaning of 'the American character'.

Such was part of the load I carried with me up the hill toward Carthage the afternoon I paid my tourist's visit. . . .

There were no other visitors, and, wandering the ancient site, I seemed momentarily to have escaped America. The monk who showed me around was a pungent personality, a man of intelligence and spirit, and I wish I remembered his name to commemorate it here. Bearded and hook-nosed, he looked more Arab than French, and it amuses me to imagine him as a bastard scion of some noble son of the desert, that I may place his rather earthy person better against the brown African earth and the ancient bay, so tranquil that day that it looked like a stagnant pool.

But, showing a stele from the late period of Carthage, he had only to turn it over to make America reappear: the back was completely covered with the scrawls of American soldiers. This might have been a tile lifted from a public urinal somewhere in America: here were the familiar hieroglyphs of the public lavatory, scrawled hearts and arrows with the inscribed girlfriend, Midwestern names and Midwestern places. Where Roman and Arab had left not a stone standing, American pencils could not resist the compulsion to defile.

I stammered my dismay and apology. But it occurs to me now that he could easily have washed away those signatures. Perhaps the antiquarian's instinct restrained him from removing this deposit of another and new civilization, which might perplex archacologists a thousand years from now to decipher.

The tombs of the ancient Carthaginians evoke Freud: long narrow tubes, just big enough for a man to penetrate, lead deep into a round chamber where the corpse was placed in a foetal position. From these tombs had been excavated pottery, figurines, imported art from Greece or Etruria. But the Carthaginians themselves seemed to fade away into the mystery of their tombs, eluding the speech of art.

'*Mais, mon père,*' I was puzzled, 'where is *l'art indigène* of the Carthaginians themselves?'

His eyes glittered: it was an opportunity he had been waiting for. '*Justement, ils n'en avaient pas.*' He began to snicker. 'They were not artists. They were commercial and business people. They were the Americans of antiquity.' And he gave a shout of laughter like a boy who has just played a practical joke. It was his revenge for those scrawls on the stele.

It was only the next day that his remark began to awaken reverberations as I sat dozing in the plane that fled westward over

the even ridges of clouds beneath which the distant ocean shone dully like a level paving. The remark in itself was nothing very much, neither very new nor altogether true, and one might have retorted, though not without irony, that the monk's countrymen in Europe were at that moment making a fetish of the American novel. It was the conjuncture of remark, site, and projected impatience of my return, that placed before me a new perspective: the vanished Mediterranean civilization that had somehow by-passed the stage of a genuine artistic culture. I realized that I, and perhaps a good many others, had always been going on an assumption that now looked much more contingent than necessary: history had shown great cultures arising in the past out of epochs of great wealth and power, so that unconsciously we had become possessed by a notion of spontaneous generation, believing that America, this crude but rich and powerful youth among the nations, would some day have *its own* culture just as inevitably as all the powers of the past had come into theirs. Now a question came to take the place of this once partly-unconscious but wholly confident belief: Perhaps America had already by-passed the stage of a real artistic culture? Or was well on the way to by-passing it?

To Carthage, then, I came, and over the glittering stalagmites of the New York skyline I could see this question hovering, and it was this question that came to meet me with the flat earth that spun up obliquely under the wheels of the landing plane.

II. THE FOLK AND THE MASS: THE IMMIGRANT

Now, whenever I walk in these streets, I look out of the eyes of this question upon the Grand Canyon of the Big Money, where the surplus of power and wealth threatens to swamp any real human culture. If cultures of the past have arisen only from an economic surplus, perhaps the condition, when in excess, cancels the very possibility of growth, and the American may be too rich to have patience for the sacrifices that culture demands.

At any rate, the critics and historians who have lately been engaged in exhuming an American tradition as something available for our art now seem to me to have missed the overwhelming question for this moment of our history. Constance Rourke, in her *Roots of American Culture*, digs up many touching relics of folk art from our early history: Shakers, folk painters, colonial theatricals; but when she comes to project a possible destiny for

American art on the basis of this material, she forgets everything that is happening to America now:

‘Now whether or not so positive a contrast exists between our artistic intention and that of European groups, the fact remains that our “configuration” is not the European “configuration”, either socially or geographically. . . . It would seem obvious that our art, if we are to have one, must spring from the centre rather than from the periphery of our social pattern.

‘Let us lay down the principle that the American artist cannot take off from the same points of departure as the European artist. Let us accept the fact that it is futile for the American artist to try to “catch up” with Europeans because at best he is trying to do something of his own.’

And finally:

‘Perhaps the American artist cannot now assume those simple and intuitive attitudes which the artist always wants—which most of us want—but he may consciously work toward a discovery of our traditions, attempt to use them, and eventually take his inevitable place.’

The first part of this last sentence seems to me to give away the game. Yes, the American must work toward his centre, but what does he find there? Hardly those quaint curios that Constant Rourke exhumes, like so many spinning wheels or old andirons that you find in the little antique shops throughout New England. What relevance has the obscure painter of the Erie Canal, Voltaire Combe, for a young artist now existing in metropolitan New York, who has been looking at the world for some time with the complicated vision of modern painting? The folk art that Constance Rourke talks of is dead and drowned beneath a commercial culture uniform throughout America.

Take the example of what has been happening to jazz and popular song in America. In the 'twenties and 'thirties popular songs used to have an individuality, bounce, wit, or at least topical relevance to events like the Crash or the Depression. But the music industry has now swallowed most of the folk elements of jazz, the popular song has become the 'hit song', something that can be put across by clever radio manipulation, and therefore need not be anything more than a sentimental blur. This is the singing style of Frank Sinatra, which depends on nothing so much as on making any song sound like any other. Turn on the radio, words

and tune (if any) float out in an indistinguishable murmur, and the bobbysox girls scream like hyenas when the droning voice stops. The law of modern culture has been that the mass corrupts the *élite*, but here we have come upon something new and worse: *the mass corrupts the folk*. Folk art demands the existence of a relatively small community expressing itself through the media of song, dance, handicraft; but since entertainment has become a large-scale capitalist enterprise in America, our various cultural exploiters—Hollywood, the radio, the magazine syndicates—have very efficiently made the popular community disappear into the mass.

The 'twenties also gave us such superior popular artists as Lardner, Fitzgerald, George Gershwin, all of whom might have been really major artists had this not involved a separation from American life of which they were not capable. Their unique quality was to retain their popular roots, and, within the narrower limits thus imposed, produce something real and convincing. I doubt that their phenomenon could be repeated today; the slick machine-tooled fiction of the *New Yorker* has produced a taste that would find Lardner too crude and would require Fitzgerald to be more tired, sophisticated, and mincing. And instead of *Porgy and Bess*, full of authentic bits, we have the smooth, expertly paced musical show like *Oklahoma*.

We have got on to the subject of the sociology of the culture, about which I have made some remarks elsewhere,¹ so that here I should like not to repeat but to draw some further conclusions. Once we pose the sociological question we pose the question of our American middle classes. The literature of the period before the Civil War came to an end when its social base—the colonial bourgeoisie and a fundamentally agrarian society—was superseded by the new capitalist class that came to power during and after the war. The earlier literature seemed to have about as much relevance to the new America as Beowulf to the Elizabethans. Though we are currently finding out that the literature of the decades immediately following the Civil War was not the complete blank we first thought it, it was certainly a terrible drop from the earlier period. The new capitalist class was crude, grasping and vulgar, which is the historical way with all new classes; but why, we have to ask, has this class shown not the least sign

¹ 'The Resistance.' *Partisan Review*, Sept. 1946.

of settling down into any productive and genuine culture of its own?

The historical parallel would be Molière's Bourgeois Gentilhomme, who was in his time as crude, *arriviste*, and uneducated as our first American millionaires. But what happened? The bourgeois gentilhomme settled down into culture, and the French bourgeoisie produced during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries one of the great cultures of history. Why does the American bourgeoisie, on the historical scene now since the 1870s, aspire at its very highest only to the culture purveyed by the *New York Sunday Times Book Review* and the Book of the Month Club? There are probably many causes, but one suspects chiefly the excessive riches of the United States: why should we expect our middle classes to read anything requiring effort and attention when they have so many other easy mechanical ways of escaping boredom and so many commercial panders to their sloth? The German bourgeois, when he wanted music, organized his string quartets at home, the American family tunes in the radio.

And, of course, our middle classes have found their perfect historical expression and spokesman in the professional middlebrow. In 1915, when Van Wyck Brooks was still a valuable (that is, hostile) critic of American life, he summed up our cultural situation in the conflict between lowbrow and highbrow. These were peculiarly American terms, Brooks observed, applying nowhere else in the world so appositely; they defined the poles between which all American writing oscillated: the cold pallor of the Genteel Tradition on the one hand, and, on the other, the flushed ruddy vulgarity, lack of form, ideas, or finesse in our popular, folk or pseudo-folk writers. But America's cultural evolution since 1915 has introduced the middle term that altogether upsets Brooks's original dichotomy: highbrow and lowbrow have given way to the complete domination by the middlebrow. Not only does the middlebrow reach millions through magazines like *Time* and the *New Yorker*, he has even infiltrated the highest places in our academic life; so that, confident and cocksure, he no longer contents himself merely with his original role, which was to make easy digests of culture for a mass audience, but carries on an aggressive, often cleverly veiled, warfare against all things difficult and 'highbrow'.

These are some of the social facts that make me raise the

perspective of Carthage, though I intend no parallel between the two very different civilizations beyond the possibility that art may be unnecessary to either. Because we learn about past civilizations chiefly through their art, we come to associate art with civilization much too automatically. The structures of civilization are for human survival, and the production and enjoyment of literature as we have known it in the past is not a necessity of life. A society whose energies are directed principally to technology, and where art appears only as a mass-produced and easy form of 'escape' or 'relaxation', is not only possible, but seems the actual direction in which America is travelling.

But not to appear too 'negative' or 'destructive' or any of the other things by which people condemn the effort to be honest, I do see one group in American life as the possible pinch of spice that might eventually season the whole dish: the immigrant. I include under this term not merely the recently arrived in America, but all who are not so far removed from that arrival that they have ceased to think of themselves in relation to Europe.

For myself, I propose to convert the immigrant's condition into a cultural goal. Since I have no sense of ownership of Ralph Waldo Emerson, I see no reason why I should not go directly to Kant for my Transcendentalism, if I want any; there is, after all, no tariff. If I find Stendhal more relevant to my life and intelligence than Hawthorne, why should I not say so and study the Frenchman more intensively than the American? There is not enough time to live, and we have to decide quite early what few subjects we can hope to know well. I must even confess to some ambivalent feelings when I read the recent admirable poetry of Robert Lowell, which is loud with the ghosts of his American ancestors. As personal ghosts they function very well, but Lowell seeks to load them with a legendary and epic weight, which for me they cannot quite bear, so that I am incapable at that point of the complete participation demanded of the ideal reader.

Well then, since the accident of my birth and some obscurer accident of my nature have thrown me out of American life, I propose to make capital of my estrangement, and my way of being American shall be to appropriate whatever in Europe I can and want. This is the most personal statement I can make in the way of a programme, yet the personal attitude would not be worth very much if it did not also correspond to the very real

and actual political situation of America and Europe. So far as Western Europe still retains any political and cultural existence of its own, it does so against the protecting bulwark of the United States. I am converting this fundamental political reality into a cultural goal. It should be obvious that this appropriation of Europe has nothing to do with that of the Gilded Age, when the American pilgrims thought they could bring back Europe in a load of valuable bric-à-brac; we have no money to spend, and we do not expect to purchase any substitute for the difficult work of making something of our own. America may not have by-passed the stage of a genuine culture, but it has certainly gone beyond the stage of a purely nationalist one. When politics has already gone beyond the stage where directly national issues were the dominating concern, any attempt to return culture to purely national and American origins is a hopeless regression to a past that can never come alive again.

And, in any case, has not America always belonged to the immigrant?

III. 'OUR' LANGUAGE

Turning from sociology, which is likely to get dull, to the question of our American language, we shall, nevertheless, find ourselves coming around in the end to the same realities. We inherit the English language with its enormous resources, chief of which, perhaps, is its great plasticity to absorb new strains within its hybrid richness. America has added a strain of its own, and there can be no doubt that there is such a thing as an American style. Recently I had the powerful experience of reading *Huckleberry Finn*, which I had not picked up since childhood, and finding (or hearing) the filiation of Sherwood Anderson and Hemingway so palpable and definite.

"The stars were shining, and the leaves rustled in the woods ever so mournful; and I heard an owl, away off, who-whooping about somebody that was dead, and a whippowill and a dog crying about somebody that was going to die; and the wind was trying to whisper something to me, and I couldn't make out what it was, and so it made the cold shivers run over me. Then away out in the woods I heard that kind of sound that a ghost makes when it wants to tell about something that's on its mind and can't make itself understood, and so can't lie easy in its grave, and has to go about that way every night grieving. I got so downhearted and

scared I did wish I had some company. Pretty soon a spider went crawling up my shoulder, and I flipped it off and it lit in the candle; and before I budged it was all shrivelled up.'

The American writer, then, has solved the problem of a style in relation to the spoken language, but only for fiction. The need of American writing today is precisely a prose style for all expository uses that will be at once generally available and in community with the spoken language. I am not talking about a prose for strictly 'literary' uses only, but one that will be written easily and naturally by historians, scholars, economists and politicians. If you compare the writing by scholars of comparable stature in England and America, I think you will find that nine times out of ten the Englishman's style is superior in ease and lucidity: the difference between the languages of British and American philosophy would make a powerful illustration, and one need only think of the different styles of Bertrand Russell and John Dewey. You in England do have an established tradition of an expository prose in relation to your spoken language, which we Americans, through our very lack, may perceive more keenly, as when Henry James made at Bryn Mawr his famous tirade against our American speech. But you required history and John Dryden to conquer this territory of a functional, clear, direct prose, while we, in the midst of our historical struggle with the American language, still await our Dryden. And when the words do not come so easily, who can blame our scholars if they sometimes relinquish the struggle altogether? Even our literary critics suffer from the same difficulty: over the past two decades America has produced a remarkable and distinguished body of criticism, but no one will say, I think, that it does not often suffer from a language that is not the most natural and lucid in the world.

But language is communication, and every problem in language becomes also a social problem. The social problem, here as elsewhere, is one of producers and consumers: Who will write this prose? For what audience? What will be communicated by it? So long as there is no wide or integrated public in America that is interested in ideas and their discussion, this need of a satisfactory prose will never be felt as urgent and is thereby so much farther from consummation. The small literary group that is interested in ideas has been driven, over the last decades, into the academic cloister, and the tradition of the American academy is one of an

over-specialization that has never felt the need of a decent general communication. The parts of our culture that have not been taken over by commercialism are being rapidly surrendered to academism, so that some of our reviews show that spreading pallor of staid dullness which is literary death.

This problem of our language may be one reason why we in America admire James Joyce much more than you do in England. His attitude obviously carries the special feeling of the Irishman's revolt against England, which is not relevant to our American situation, but anyone who has read H. L. Mencken's *The American Language* must realize that the immigrant has permanently modified our ear for English so that we come to it with something of Joyce's sense of being a foreigner: we can make it ours only by adding something of our own. It is not that we do not respond to the great models in English literature, but the problem is not to be solved out of hand by fixing on this or that example from the past. It is a question of our day-to-day speech, our struggles with this speech, and the establishing of a viable expository medium on its basis. At which point we seem to tread a vicious circle: this medium will not exist unless there is a real group of consumers (which the medium itself must summon into existence) for what Balzac called 'the literature of ideas'. Carthage?

IV. WALK IN AND OUT OF THE SUN

I have been writing these random notes about America without attempting a systematic comment on any American writer, and I am conscious now that my text throughout has really been this city itself, where walking the streets I have been trying to read the American riddle. No doubt, New York is not America, and you can find this reflected a hundred ways in popular speech and attitudes; with its conglomerate foreign populations it is above all the immigrants' city, suggesting an outpost of some last European capital; but it is American too, all too American, the point where the forces of American life converge at their highest tension and tempo. That distance (on which I remarked at the beginning) that I feel between myself and most of the American authors I read is, perhaps, only a reflection of the distance between New York and the other American communities in which I have lived or tried to live at various times; and, deeper still, the distance

between myself and the driving life of this city itself. When there is no real community, you sometimes feel strangest in the company of the members of your own family. Thus William Faulkner moves me more powerfully than any other American novelist because he seems actually to incarnate (not merely express) the alienation in American life at its deepest level, where it isolates not one group from the rest of the community, but every man from every other; those puppets, his characters, are blown into life only by the wind of violence that is nothing but his own fierce effort to overcome their distance from himself—his distance from himself; an irony, not at all amusing, in a writer who, more than any of our novelists, has sought to immerse himself in a thoroughly regional existence.

Perhaps I ought to conclude, then, by taking you, my English reader, on a walk through the streets of my text itself, pointing out how the American deities breathe over our shoulder at every step. Certainly, it would be a powerful theme, no city in the world offers so much in the way of spectacle, though we must not confuse spectacle with beauty which cannot exist out of human scale. On a clear winter afternoon (New York's best light), and seen from anywhere above the thirtieth storey, New York offers cubism and perspective at once in the most startling and unimaginable shapes; and then the approaches to the city, its rivers and waterfront, its sixteen bridges and its lights, its . . . But enough, my Muse! you have no talent for this lyric Cook's tour; let the European come and gasp, the American must abide and question; doubt, suspect, deny; ask: 'Is it possible for me to live a really human life here? How? Where?'

Perhaps in this old tenement (why, it is where I live!) from which we step out into the morning sun that warms indifferently the long rows of uncollected garbage cans, the prowling cats, and blowsy old women conversing on doorsteps? We are in Greenwich Village, which enjoyed during the 'twenties a bright blaze of life as our Bohemia; but do not expect anything like a Parisian Latin Quarter, here are no cafés and no open-air community of the intellectual life. The handful of people who devote themselves to the life of intelligence and the arts are scattered about, very lonely and slowly encroached upon: a tenement crumbles and a tall apartment building rises in its place, where the middle-class couples come to live, both returning from an uptown office at

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the end of their day to buy their dinner in the corner delicatessen. You do not live here for any richly Bohemian gratifications, but because you can find, or could find before the war, a crumbling flat cheaper than in other sections of the city. There is usually some prosaic reason behind the characteristics by which the popular imagination defines the Bohemian: those clothes he wears are not a carefully chosen uniform, but the remains of an ordinary and cheap suit that has decayed around the nucleus of its empty pocket. All around us the immigrant poor swarm, but they do not live here from choice and they dream of the day when they will get their foot one rung higher on the social ladder and be able to move out to the lower middle-class suburbs of Queens and Brooklyn.

On a clear day like this, you can see in the distance the towers of Wall Street to the south and the mid-town towers to the north, which cast their invisible shadow over this shabby neighbourhood. In that shadow we live and move; and even these girls you see walking about in slacks tell their own story of those distant buildings.

Consider them carefully: the Village is filled with their Ladies' Sewing Circles of the Arts, engaged, amid their ingrown gossip and unorthodox amours, in embroidering the literature of feminine sensibility. Art that springs from a rich, rather than impoverished, life has a greater chance of being interesting, and the more a writer participates in the powerful occasions and groups of his time, the more likely he is to create characters that bear the weight of generalization. Scott Fitzgerald (who had in this respect the real novelist's sense) understood this, and he sought to locate his characters, like Gatsby and Monroe Stahr, in crucial areas of American experience, where they were capable of becoming quasi-symbolic figures. But Fitzgerald could maintain his contact with the rich and powerful only through earning \$35,000 a year by writing trash for the *Saturday Evening Post*. The writer who would deal with this city ought to have access to the people who sit in the high places of those distant towers, Radio City or Wall Street, who amuse themselves in the Stork Club or pull the impresario's strings of Broadway; but it is possible for him to move in their world only by selling out and ceasing to be serious. In America the man must make money or feel his masculinity compromised; integrity seems on its way to becoming the property of these girls walking about the Village in slacks, the

novel of feminine sensibility may soon be the only kind of deliberately artistic fiction we have, and once again the American woman will have triumphed over the American male.

If I go this morning to the Central Library at 42nd Street, I begin again, consciously or unconsciously, to read the same American features in the people about me: professional researchers from the offices of the magazine syndicates, people reading for God knows what certificate from God knows what Extension course—and the unclassifiables, like myself, who quickly betray themselves by the uneasy eye or the shabby exterior. Odious comparisons! No doubt my mind would not run on these things if it, too, were not penetrated by the inhuman competitiveness of American life, which none of us here can escape, and which makes it harder for the young artist or intellectual to endure a cheerful poverty. Even here in this quiet reading-room the American deity of Success breathes on the back of my neck.

At noon a cigarette under the colonnade in front of the Library while we watch the clerks and stenographers pour pell-mell out of the great buildings for their lunchtime sandwich and chocolate malted. (In America we do not yet know the meaning of food.) Against these crowds, and against the huge surrounding buildings that have framed my life since childhood, I must take the measure of my own existence. To make (but by an act of real appropriation) certain parts of a foreign culture accessible to one's countrymen would seem a very small thing; but we may recall that it was the chief accomplishment of a poet who has had, perhaps, as much influence as any, and Horace himself did not think it a small thing:

ex humili potens
princeps Aeolium carmen ad Italos
deduxisse modos.

An American is not likely to parallel the rest of that boast: in this country one will be read by a few thousand people at most, and win the direct approval of perhaps a few dozen. And if this should seem un-American in its smallness of scale, it may nevertheless be something we call American in the end. 'If I can construct one small thing on which I can build,' said Paul Klee—and who knows but there may be a divine balance somewhere in which any such small, *genuine* thing will weigh against one of these immense skyscrapers?

PART II INTIMATIONS OF YES

MUSIC IS INTERNATIONAL

W. H. AUDEN

Orchestras have so long been speaking
This universal language that the Greek
And the Barbarian have both mastered
Its enigmatic grammar which at last
Says all things well. But who is worthy?
What is sweet? What is sound? Much of the earth
Is austere, her temperate regions
Swarming with cops and robbers; germs besiege
The walled towns, and among the living
The captured outnumber the fugitive.
Where silence is coldest and darkest,
Among the staring blemishes that mark
War's havocking slot, it is easy
To guess what dream such vaulting cries release:
The unamerican survivor
Hears angels drinking fruit-juice with their wives
Or making money in an open
Unpoliced air. But what is our hope,
As with an ostentatious rightness
These gratuitous sounds like water and light
Bless the Republic? Do they sponsor
For us the mornes and motted mammelons,
The sharp streams and sottering springs of
A commuter's wish, where each frescade rings
With melodious boeing and hooing
As some natural lovejoy deigns to woo,
And nothing dreadful ever happened?
Probably yes. We are easy to trap,
Being Adam's children, as thirsty
For mere illusion still as when the first
Comfortable heresy crooned to
The proud flesh founded on the self-made wound,
And what we find rousing or touching