

## Chapter Nine

### THE REVOLT OF THE HIGHBROWS

"Here was a new generation . . . grown up to find all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken."

—F. Scott Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise*.

BY THE end of the war with Germany, social compulsion had become a national habit. The typical American of the old stock had never had more than a half-hearted enthusiasm for the rights of the minority; bred in a pioneer tradition, he had been accustomed to set his community in order by the first means that came to hand—a sumptuary law, a vigilance committee, or if necessary a shotgun. Declarations of Independence and Bills of Rights were all very well in the history books, but when he was running things himself he had usually been open to the suggestion that liberty was another name for license and that the Bill of Rights was the last resort of scoundrels. During the war he had discovered how easy it was to legislate and propagandize and intimidate his neighbors into what seemed to him acceptable conduct, and after peace was declared he went on using the same sort of methods to see that they continued to conform.

From Liberty-loan campaigns—with a quota for everybody and often a threat for those who were slow to contribute—he turned to community-chest drives and college-endowment-fund drives and church-membership drives and town-boosting drives and a multitude of other public campaigns: committees and subcommittees were organized, press agents distributed their canned releases, orators belabored, and the man who kept a tight grip on his pocketbook

felt the uncomfortable pressure of mass opinion. From the coercion of alien enemies and supposed pro-Germans it was a short step, as we have seen, to the coercion of racial minorities and supposed Bolsheviks. From war-time censorship it was a short step to peace-time censorship of newspapers and books and public speech. And from legislating sobriety in war-time it was a short step to imbedding prohibition permanently in the Constitution and trying to write the moral code of the majority into the statute-books. Business, to be sure, was freed of most of the shackles which had bound it in 1917 and 1918, for the average American now identified his own interests with those of business. But outside of business he thought he knew how people ought to behave, and he would stand for no nonsense.

After the early days of the Big Red Scare, the American middle-class majority met with little resistance in its stern measures against radicalism and its insistence upon *laissez faire* for business. While labor was being cowed by the police or lured into compliance by stock ownership and the hope of riches, the educated liberals who a few years before had been ready to die at the barricades for minimum-wage laws and equal suffrage and the right to collective bargaining were sinking into hopeless discouragement. Politics, they were deciding, was a vulgar mess; the morons always outnumbered the enlightened, the tobacco-spitting district leaders held the morons in a firm grip, and the right to vote was a joke. Welfare work was equally futile: it was stuffy, sentimental, and presumptuous. The bright young college graduate who in 1915 would have risked disinheritance to march in a Socialist parade yawned at Socialism in 1925, called it old stuff, and cared not at all whether the employees of the Steel Corporation were underpaid or overpaid. Fashions had changed: now the young insurgent enraged his father by arguing against monogamy and God.

When, however, the middle-class majority turned from

persecuting political radicals to regulating personal conduct, they met with bitter opposition not only from the bright young college graduate but from the whole of a newly class-conscious group. The intellectuals of the country—the “civilized minority,” as the *American Mercury* liked to call them—rose in loud and bitter revolt.

They were never an organized group, these embattled highbrows. They differed vehemently among themselves, and even if they had agreed, the idea of organizing would have been repugnant to them as individualists. They were widely dispersed; New York was their chief rallying-point, but groups of them were to be found in all the other urban centers. They consisted mostly of artists and writers, professional people, the intellectually restless element in the college towns, and such members of the college-educated business class as could digest more complicated literature than was to be found in the *Saturday Evening Post* and *McCall's Magazine*; and they were followed by an ill-assorted mob of faddists who were ready to take up with the latest idea. They may be roughly and inclusively defined as the men and women who had heard of James Joyce, Proust, Cézanne, Jung, Bertrand Russell, John Dewey, Petronius, Eugene O'Neill, and Eddington; who looked down on the movies but revered Charlie Chaplin as a great artist, could talk about relativity even if they could not understand it, knew a few of the leading complexes by name, collected Early American furniture, had ideas about progressive education, and doubted the divinity of Henry Ford and Calvin Coolidge. Few in numbers though they were, they were highly vocal, and their influence not merely dominated American literature but filtered down to affect by slow degrees the thought of the entire country.

These intellectuals felt the full disenchantment of the Peace of Versailles while the returning heroes of Armageddon were still parading past the reviewing-stands. The

dreary story of a brutal war and a sordid settlement was spread before their resentful eyes in books like Sir Philip Gibbs's *Now It Can Be Told*, John Dos Passos's *Three Soldiers*, E. E. Cummings's *The Enormous Room*, and John Maynard Keynes's *Economic Consequences of the Peace*. They were early converts to the devastating new psychology; the more youthful of them, in fact, were petting according to Freud while their less tutored contemporaries were petting simply because they liked it and could get away with it. Many of the intellectuals had felt the loss of certainty which resulted from new scientific knowledge long before the word Fundamentalism had even been coined or the Einstein theory had reached the research laboratories. Their revolt against the frock-coated respectability and decorous formality of American literature had been under way for several years; Theodore Dreiser, Willa Cather, Carl Sandburg, Edgar Lee Masters, Robert Frost, Vachel Lindsay, Amy Lowell, and the Imagists and exponents of free verse had been breaking new ground since before the war. When twenty of the intellectuals collaborated in the writing of *Civilization in the United States* (published in 1922 under the editorship of Harold Stearns) they summed up the opinion of thousands of their class in their agreement that "the most amusing and pathetic fact in the social life of America today is its emotional and æsthetic starvation." But the revolt of the highbrows against this emotional and æsthetic starvation, and against "the mania for petty regulation" to which it led, would hardly have gathered imposing force as soon as it did had Sinclair Lewis not brought out *Main Street* in October, 1920, and *Babbitt* some two years later.

The effect of these two books was overwhelming. In two volumes of merciless literary photography and searing satire, Lewis revealed the ugliness of the American small town, the cultural poverty of its life, the tyranny of its mass prejudices, and the blatant vulgarity and insularity of the

booster. There were other things which he failed to reveal—such as the friendly sentiment and easy generosity of the Gopher Prairies and Zeniths of America—but his books were all the more widely devoured for their very one-sidedness. By the end of 1922 the sale of *Main Street* had reached 390,000 copies. The intellectuals had only to read Lewis's books to realize that the qualities in American life which they most despised and feared were precisely the ones which he put under the microscope for cold-blooded examination. It was George F. Babbitt who was the arch enemy of the enlightened, and it was the Main Street state of mind which stood in the way of American civilization.

After *Babbitt*, a flood of books reflected the dissatisfaction of the highbrows with the rule of America by the business man and their growing disillusionment. The keynoter of this revolt, its chief tomtom beater, was H. L. Mencken.

## § 2

For several years Mencken, a Baltimorean trained in newspaper work on the *Baltimore Sun*, had been editing the *Smart Set* in company with George Jean Nathan. The *Smart Set* did not prosper; its name and its somewhat dubious previous reputation were against it. When it was languishing Alfred A. Knopf, the book-publisher, engaged Mencken and Nathan to conduct a new monthly magazine addressed to the intellectual left wing, and the first issue of the *American Mercury* appeared at the close of 1923. This—if you are uncertain about dates—was a few weeks before Woodrow Wilson's death; it was at the moment when Senator Walsh was trying to find out who had bestowed money upon Secretary Fall, when Richard Simon was about to hatch the *Cross-Word Puzzle Book* idea, and the Bok Peace Prize was about to be awarded to Charles H. Levermore.

The green cover of the *Mercury* and its format were as sedate as the marble-trimmed façade of Mencken's house in Baltimore, but its contents were explosive. It carried over from the *Smart Set* as regular features Mencken's literary notes, Nathan's theatrical criticisms, a series of editorial jottings which had been called *Répétition Generale* and now became *Clinical Notes*, and a museum of American absurdities known as *Americana*. Every month Mencken occupied several pages with a polemic against the lowbrow majority and its works. The magazine lustily championed writers such as Dreiser, Cabell, Sherwood Anderson, Willa Cather, and Sinclair Lewis, who defied the polite traditions represented by the American Academy of Arts and Letters; it poured critical acid upon sentimentality and evasion and academic pomposity in books and in life; it lambasted Babbitts, Rotarians, Methodists, and reformers, ridiculed both the religion of Coolidge Prosperity and what Mencken called the "bilge of idealism," and looked upon the American scene in general with raucous and profane laughter.

The *Mercury* made an immediate hit. It was new, startling, and delightfully destructive. It crystallized the misgivings of thousands. Soon its green cover was clasped under the arms of the young iconoclasts of a score of college campuses. Staid small-town executives, happening upon it, were shocked and bewildered; this man Mencken, they decided, must be a debauched and shameless monster if not a latter-day emissary of the devil. When Mencken visited Dayton to report the Scopes trial and called the Daytonians yokels, hillbillies, and peasants, the Reverend A. C. Stribling replied that Mencken was a "cheap blatherskite of a pen-pusher"; and to such retorts there was a large section of outraged public opinion ready to cry Amen. After a few years so much abuse had been heaped upon the editor of the *Mercury* that it was possible to publish for the delectation

of his admirers a *Schimpflexicon*—a book made up entirely of highly uncomplimentary references to him. Meanwhile the circulation of his magazine climbed to more than 77,000 by 1927; and in that same year Walter Lippmann called him, without exaggeration, “the most powerful personal influence on this whole generation of educated people.”

To many readers it seemed as if Mencken were against everything. This was not true, but certainly rebellion was the breath of his life. He was “against all theologians, professors, editorial-writers, right thinkers, and reformers” (to quote his own words). He was “against patriotism because it demands the acceptance of propositions that are obviously imbecile—*e.g.*, that an American Presbyterian is the equal of Anatole France, Brahms, or Ludendorff.” He did not believe that “civilized life was possible under a democracy.” He spoke of socialists and anarchists as fools. He was against prohibition, censorship, and all other interferences with personal liberty. He scoffed at morality and Christian marriage. There was an apparent inconsistency in this formidable collection of prejudices: how, some of his critics asked, could one expect an aristocracy of intellect, such as he preferred, to permit such liberties as he insisted upon, unless it happened to be made up entirely of Menckens—a rather unlikely premise? Inconsistencies, however, bothered Mencken not at all, and at first bothered few of his followers. For it was not easy to be coolly analytical in the face of such a prose style as he commanded.

He brought to his offensive against the lowbrows an unparalleled vocabulary of invective. He pelted his enemies with words and phrases like mountebank, charlatan, swindler, numskull, swine, witch-burner, *homo boobiens*, and imbecile; he said of sentimentalists that they squirted rose-water about, of Bryan that “he was born with a roaring voice and it had a trick of inflaming half-wits,” of books

which he disliked that they were garbage; he referred to the guileless farmers of Tennessee as "gaping primates" and "the anthropoid rabble." On occasion—as in his scholarly book on *The American Language*—Mencken could write measured and precise English, but when his blood was up, his weapons were gross exaggeration and gross metaphors. The moment he appeared the air was full of flying brickbats; and to read him for the first time gave one, if not blind rage, the sort of intense visceral delight which comes from heaving baseballs at crockery in an amusement park.

The years when Mencken's wholesale idol-smashing first attracted wide attention, be it remembered, were the very years when the prosperity chorus was in full voice, Bruce Barton was revising Christian doctrine for the glorification of the higher salesmanship, the Fundamentalists were on the rampage against evolution, and the Methodist Board of Temperance, Prohibition, and Public Morals was trying to mold the country into sober conformity. Up to this time the intellectuals had been generally on the defensive. But now, with Mencken's noisy tub-thumping to give them assurance, they changed their tone. Other magazines joined, though less stridently, in the cry of dissent: *Harper's* put on an orange cover in 1925 and doubled its circulation by examining American life with a new critical boldness, *The Forum* debated subjects which Main Street considered undebatable, the *Atlantic* published the strictures of James Truslow Adams, and by the end of the decade even *Scribner's* was banned from the newsstands of Boston for printing a Hemingway serial. Books reflecting the intellectual minority's views of the United States and of life gushed from the presses. Slowly the volume of protest grew, until by 1926 or 1927 anybody who uttered a good word for Rotary or Bryan in any house upon whose walls hung a reproduction of Picasso or Marie Laurencin, or upon whose shelves stood



*The Sun Also Rises* or *Notes on Democracy*, was likely to be set down as an incurable moron.

### § 3

What was the credo of the intellectuals during these years of revolt? Not many of them accepted all the propositions in the following rough summary; yet it suggests, perhaps, the general drift of their collective opinion:

1. They believed in a greater degree of sex freedom than had been permitted by the strict American code; and as for discussion of sex, not only did they believe it should be free, but some of them appeared to believe it should be continuous. They formed the spearhead of the revolution in manners and morals which has been described in Chapter V. From the early days of the decade, when they thrilled at the lackadaisical petting of F. Scott Fitzgerald's young thinkers and at the boldness of Edna St. Vincent Millay's announcement that her candle burned at both ends and could not last the night, to the latter days when they were all agog over the literature of homosexuality and went by the thousand to take Eugene O'Neill's five-hour lesson in psychopathology, *Strange Interlude*, they read about sex, talked about sex, thought about sex, and defied anybody to say No.

2. In particular, they defied the enforcement of propriety by legislation and detested all the influences to which they attributed it. They hated the Methodist lobby, John S. Sumner, and all other defenders of censorship; they pictured the Puritan, even of Colonial days, as a blue-nosed, cracked-voiced hypocrite; and they looked at Victorianism as half indecent and half funny. The literary reputations of Thackeray, Tennyson, Longfellow, and the Boston *literati* of the last century sank in their estimation to new lows for all time. Convinced that the era of short skirts and literary dalliance had brought a new enlightenment, the younger in-

Intellectuals laughed at the "Gay Nineties" as depicted in *Life* and joined Thomas Beer in condescending scrutiny of the voluminous dresses and fictional indirections of the Mauve Decade. Some of them, in fact, seemed to be persuaded that all periods prior to the coming of modernity had been ridiculous—with the exception of Greek civilization, Italy at the time of Casanova, France at the time of the great courtesans, and eighteenth-century England.

3. Most of them were passionate anti-prohibitionists, and this fact, together with their dislike of censorship and their skepticism about political and social regeneration, made them dubious about all reform movements and distrustful of all reformers. They emphatically did not believe that they were their brothers' keepers; anybody who did not regard tolerance as one of the supreme virtues was to them intolerable. If one heard at a single dinner party of advanced thinkers that there were "too many laws" and that people ought to be let alone, one heard it at a hundred. In 1915 the word reformer had been generally a complimentary term; in 1925 it had become—among the intellectuals, at least—a term of contempt.

4. They were mostly, though not all, religious skeptics. If there was less shouting agnosticism and atheism in the nineteen-twenties than in the eighteen-nineties it was chiefly because disbelief was no longer considered sensational and because the irreligious intellectuals, feeling no evangelical urge to make over others in their own image, were content quietly to stay away from church. It is doubtful if any college undergraduate of the 'nineties or of any other previous period in the United States could have said "No intelligent person believes in God any more" as blandly as undergraduates said it during the discussions of compulsory college chapel which raged during the 'twenties. Never before had so many books addressed to the thinking public

assumed at the outset that their readers had rejected the old theology.

5. They were united in a scorn of the great bourgeois majority which they held responsible for prohibition, censorship, Fundamentalism, and other repressions. They emulated Mencken in their disgust at Babbitts, Rotarians, the Ku-Klux Klan, Service-with-a-Smile, boosters, and super-salesmen. Those of them who lived in the urban centers prided themselves on their superiority to the denizens of the benighted outlying cities and towns where Babbittry flourished; witness, for example, the motto of the *New Yorker* when it was first established in the middle of the decade: "Not for the old lady from Dubuque." Particularly did they despise the mobs of prosperous American tourists which surged through Europe; one could hardly occupy a steamer chair next to anybody who had Aldous Huxley's latest novel on his lap without being told of a delightful little restaurant somewhere in France which was quite "unspoiled by Americans."

6. They took a particular pleasure in overturning the idols of the majority; hence the vogue among them of the practice for which W. E. Woodward, in a novel published in 1923, invented the word "debunking." Lytton Strachey's *Queen Victoria*, which had been a best seller in the United States in 1922, was followed by a deluge of debunking biographies. Rupert Hughes removed a few coats of whitewash from George Washington and nearly caused a riot when he declared in a speech that "Washington was a great card-player, a distiller of whisky, and a champion curser, and he danced for three hours without stopping with the wife of his principal general." Other American worthies were portrayed in all their erring humanity, and the notorious rascals of history were rediscovered as picturesque and glamorous fellows; until for a time it was almost taken for granted that

the biographer, if he were to be successful, must turn conventional white into black and *vice versa*.

7. They feared the effect upon themselves and upon American culture of mass production and the machine, and saw themselves as fighting at the last ditch for the right to be themselves in a civilization which was being leveled into monotony by Fordism and the chain-store mind. Their hatred of regimentation gave impetus to the progressive school movement and nourished such innovations in higher education as Antioch, Rollins, Meiklejohn's Experimental College at Wisconsin, and the honors plan at Swarthmore and elsewhere. It gave equal impetus to the little-theater movement, which made remarkable headway from coast to coast, especially in the schools. The heroes of current novels were depicted as being stifled in the air of the home town, and as fleeing for their cultural lives either to Manhattan or, better yet, to Montparnasse or the Riviera. In any café in Paris one might find an American expatriate thanking his stars that he was free from standardization at last, oblivious of the fact that there was no more standardized institution even in the land of automobiles and radio than the French sidewalk café. The intellectuals lapped up the criticisms of American culture offered them by foreign lecturers imported in record-breaking numbers, and felt no resentment when the best magazines flaunted before their eyes, month after month, titles like "Our American Stupidity" and "Childish Americans." They quite expected to be told that America was sinking into barbarism and was an altogether impossible place for a civilized person to live in—as when James Truslow Adams lamented in the *Atlantic Monthly*, "I am wondering, as a personal but practical question, just how and where a man of moderate means who prefers simple living, simple pleasures, and the things of the mind is going to be able to live any longer in his native country."

Few of the American intellectuals of the nineteen-twen-

ties, let it be repeated, subscribed to all the propositions in this credo; but he or she who accepted none of them was suspect among the enlightened. He was not truly civilized, he was not modern. The prosperity band-wagon rolled on, but by the wayside stood the highbrows with voices upraised in derision and dismay.

#### § 4

Mencken enjoyed his battle enormously, cynic though he was. He went on to meet the armed men, and said among the trumpets, Ha-ha. Everything might be wrong with American civilization, but at least it made a lovely target for his blunderbuss. "If you find so much that is unworthy of reverence in the United States, then why do you live here?" he asked himself in the Fifth Series of his *Prejudices*, only to answer, "Why do men go to zoos?" Nobody had such a good time in the American zoo as Mencken; he even got a good laugh out of the Tennessee anthropoids.

Not so, however, with most of his *confrères* in the camp of the intellectuals. The word disillusionment has been frequently employed in this history, for in a sense disillusionment (except about business and the physical luxuries and improvements which business would bring) was the keynote of the nineteen-twenties. With the majority of Americans its workings were perhaps unconscious; they felt a queer disappointment after the war, they felt that life was not giving them all they had hoped it would, they knew that some of the values which had once meant much to them were melting away, but they remained cheerful and full of gusto, quite unaware of the change which was taking place beneath the surface of their own minds. Most of the intellectuals, however, in America as elsewhere, knew all too well that they were disillusioned. Few of them, unfortunately, had grown up with as low expectations for humanity as

Mencken. You cannot fully enjoy a zoo if you have been led to think of it as the home of an enlightened citizenry.

The intellectuals believed in a greater degree of sex freedom—and many of them found it disappointing when they got it, either in person or vicariously through books and plays. They were discovering that the transmutation of love into what Krutch called a “carefully catalogued psychosis” had robbed the loveliest passages of life of their poetry and their meaning. “Emotions,” as Krutch said, “cannot be dignified unless they are first respected,” and love was becoming too easy and too biological to be an object of respect. Elmer Davis referred in one of his essays to the heroine of a post-war novel who “indulged in 259 amours, if I remember correctly, without getting the emotional wallop out of any of them, or out of all of them together, that the lady of Victorian literature would have derived from a single competently conducted seduction.” This busy heroine had many a literary counterpart and doubtless some in real life; and if one thing became clear to them, it was that romance cannot be put into quantity production, that the moment love becomes casual, it becomes commonplace as well. Even their less promiscuous contemporaries felt something of the sense of futility which came when romantic love was marked down.

As enemies of standardization and repression, the intellectuals believed in freedom—but freedom for what? Uncomfortable as it was to be harassed by prohibition agents and dictated to by chambers of commerce, it was hardly less comfortable in the long run to have their freedom and not know what to do with it. In all the nineteen-twenties there was no more dismal sight than that described by Richmond Barrett in an article in *Harper's* entitled “Babes in the Bois”—the sight of young Americans dashing to Paris to be free to do what Buffalo or Iowa City would not permit, and after being excessively rude to everybody they met and tasting a

few short and tasteless love-affairs and soaking themselves in gin, finally passing out undecoratively under a table in the Café du Dom. Mr. Barrett, to be sure, was portraying merely the lunatic fringe of the younger generation of intellectuals; but who during the nineteen-twenties did not recognize the type characterized in the title of one of Scott Fitzgerald's books as "All the Sad Young Men"? Wrote Walter Lippmann, "What most distinguishes the generation who have approached maturity since the *débâcle* of idealism at the end of the war is not their rebellion against the religion and the moral code of their parents, but their disillusionment with their own rebellion. It is common for young men and women to rebel, but that they should rebel sadly and without faith in their rebellion, and that they should distrust the new freedom no less than the old certainties—that is something of a novelty." It may be added that there were older and wiser heads than these who, in quite different ways, felt the unanswerability of the question, After freedom, what next?

They believed also, these intellectuals, in scientific truth and the scientific method—and science not only took their God away from them entirely, or reduced Him to a principle of order in the universe or a figment of the mind conjured up to meet a psychological need, but also reduced man, as Krutch pointed out in *The Modern Temper*, to a creature for whose ideas of right and wrong there was no transcendental authority. No longer was it possible to say with any positiveness, This is right, or, This is wrong; an act which was considered right in Wisconsin might be (according to the ethnologists) considered wrong in Borneo, and even in Wisconsin its merits seemed to be a matter of highly fallible human opinion. The certainty had departed from life. And what was worse still, it had departed from science itself. In earlier days those who denied the divine order had still been able to rely on a secure order of nature, but now even this was wobbling. Einstein and the quantum theory introduced

new uncertainties and new doubts. Nothing, then, was sure; the purpose of life was undiscoverable, the ends of life were less discoverable still; in all this fog there was no solid thing on which a man could lay hold and say, This is real; this will abide.

## § 5

Yet in all this uncertainty there was new promise for the intellectual life of the country. With the collapse of fixed values went a collapse of the old water-tight critical standards in the arts, opening the way for fresh and independent work to win recognition. Better still, the idea was gaining ground that this fresh and independent work might as well be genuinely native, that the time had come when the most powerful nation in the world might rid itself of its cultural subjection to Europe.

It was still hard to persuade the *cognoscenti* that first-class painting or music might come out of America. Rejecting scornfully the pretty confections of the Academicians, art collectors went in so wholeheartedly for the work of the French moderns and their imitators that the United States became almost—from the artistic point of view—a French colony. American orchestras remained under the domination of foreign conductors, played foreign compositions almost exclusively, and gave scant opportunity to the native composer. Even in art and music, however, there were signs of change. Artists were beginning to open their eyes to the pictorial possibilities of the skyscraper and the machine, and collectors waited only for George Bellows to die to bid up his rugged oils and lithographs of the American prize-ring. Music-lovers recognized at last the glory of the Negro spirituals, dabbled with the idea that George Gershwin might bridge the gap between popular jazz and vital music, permitted singers with such un-European names as Marion



Talley and Lawrence Tibbett to become stars at the Metropolitan, and listened approvingly to an American opera (without, to be sure, an American subject) composed by Deems Taylor.

In architecture there was a somewhat more eager welcome for the indigenous product. Though the usual American country house was still a Georgian manor-house or a French farmhouse or a Spanish villa fitted out with bathrooms and a two-car garage, but trying to recapture, even in Lake Forest, what the real-estate agents called "Old World charm"; though the American bank was still a classical temple and there were still architects who tried to force the life of a modern American university into a medieval Gothic frame; nevertheless there was an increasing agreement with Lewis Mumford that new materials and new uses for them called for new treatment without benefit of the Beaux Arts. The *Chicago Tribune's* competition early in the decade, and particularly the startling design by Saarinen which won second prize, suggested new possibilities for the skyscraper—possibilities at which Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright and Cass Gilbert's Woolworth Building had already hinted. The skyscraper was peculiarly American—why not solve this problem of steel construction in a novel and American way? Gradually an American architecture began to evolve. Goodhue's Public Library in Los Angeles, his Nebraska State Capitol, Arthur Loomis Harmon's Shelton Hotel in New York, the Barclay-Vesey Telephone Building (by McKenzie, Voorhees & Gmelin and Ralph Thomas Loamas), and other fine achievements at least paved the way for something which might be the logical and beautiful expression of an American need.

Finally, in literature the foreign yoke was almost completely thrown off. Even if the intellectuals bought more foreign books than ever before and migrated by the thousands to Montparnasse and Antibes, they expected to write

and to appreciate American literature. Their writing and their appreciation were both stimulated by Mencken's strenuous praise of uncompromisingly native work, by the establishment of good critical journals (such as the *Saturday Review of Literature*), and by researches into the American background which disclosed such native literary material as the Paul Bunyan legends and the cowboy ballads and such potential material as the desperadoes of the frontier and the show-boats of the rivers. There was a new ferment working, and at last there was an audience quite unconvinced that American literature must be forever inferior or imitative. Certainly a decade which produced Sinclair Lewis's *Arrowsmith*, Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, Willa Cather's novels, Benet's *John Brown's Body*, some of the plays of Eugene O'Neill, and such short stories as Ring Lardner's "Golden Honeymoon"—to make invidious mention of only a few performances—could lay claim to something better than mere promise for the future.

## § 6

Gradually the offensive against Babbitry spent itself, if only because the novelty of rebellion wore off. The circulation of the *Mercury* (and with it, perhaps, the influence of its editor) reached its peak in 1927 and thereafter slowly declined. The *New Yorker* forgot the old lady from Dubuque and developed a casual and altogether charming humor with malice toward none; the other magazines consumed by the urban intelligentsia tired somewhat of viewing the American scene with alarm. Sex fiction began to seem a little less adventurous and the debunking fad ran its course. And similarly there began to be signs, here and there, that the mental depression of the intellectuals might have seen its worst days.

In 1929—the very year which produced Krutch's *The Modern Temper*, a dismally complete statement of the philosophical disillusionment of the times—Walter Lippmann tried to lay the foundations for a new system of belief and of ethics which might satisfy even the disillusioned. The success of *A Preface to Morals* suggested that many people were tired of tobogganing into mental chaos. That same year there was a great hue and cry among the highbrows over humanism. The humanist fad was not without its comic aspect, since very few of those who diligently talked about it were clear as to which of three or four varieties of humanism they had in mind, and such cloistered beings as Paul Elmer More and Irving Babbitt were hardly the leaders to rally a popular movement of any dimensions; but it gave further evidence of a disposition among the doubters to dig in and face confusion along a new line of defense. There was also a widespread effort to find in the scientific philosophizing of Whitehead and Eddington and Jeans some basis for a belief that life might be worth living, after all. Perhaps the values which had been swept away during the post-war years had departed never to return, but at least there was a groping for new ones to take their place.

If there was, it came none too soon. For to many men and women the new day so sonorously heralded by the optimists and propagandists of war-time had turned into night before it ever arrived, and in the uncertain blackness they did not know which way to turn. They could revolt against stupidity and mediocrity, they could derive a meager pleasure from regarding themselves with pity as members of a lost generation, but they could not find peace.