Chapter 17

The Spirit of the Times

THE late President A. Lawrence Lowell of Harvard was an extempore speaker so brilliant that he could go to a public dinner quite without notes, listen to three preliminary speakers, and then, rising to speak himself, comment aptly on the remarks of those who had preceded him and lead easily into an eloquent peroration of his own. One of the reasons why he could do this was that he had almost by heart a number of suitable perorations on which he could construct variations suitable to the particular occasion. His favorite one dealt with the difference between two ancient civilizations, each of them rich and flourishing—Greece and Carthage. One of these, he would say, lives on in men's memories, influences all of us today; the other left no imprint on the ages to follow it. For Carthage, by contrast with Greece, had a purely commercial civilization in which there was little respect for learning, philosophy, or the arts. "Is America in danger of becoming a Carthage?" Lowell would ask—and then he would launch into an exposition of the vital and enduring importance of universities.

There are a great many people today, there have been a great many people throughout American history, who have in effect called the United States a Carthage. There are those who argue that during the past half century, despite the spread of good living among its people, it has been headed in the Carthaginian direction; that it has been producing a mass culture in which religion and philosophy languish, the arts are smothered by the barbarian demands of mass entertain-

ment, freedom is constricted by the dead weight of mass opinion, and the life of the spirit wanes. There are millions in Europe, for instance, to whom contemporary American culture, as they understand it, is no culture at all; to whom the typical American is a man of money, a crude, loud fellow who knows no values but mechanical and commercial ones. And there are Americans aplenty, old and young, who say that achievement in the realm of the mind and spirit has become ominously more difficult in recent years, and that our technological and economic triumphs are barren because they have brought us no inner peace.

Some of the charges against contemporary American culture one may perhaps be permitted to discount in advance. Thus one may discount the laments, by people with twenty thousand a year, that other people whose incomes have risen from two thousand to four are becoming demoralized by material success; or the nostalgia of those who, when they compare past with present, are obviously matching their own youth in pleasantly sheltered circumstances with the conditions and behavior of a much more inclusive group today. One may also point out a persistently recurring error in European appraisals of the American people: many Europeans, being accustomed to thinking of men and women who travel freely and spend amply as members of an elite, have a tendency to compare certain undeniably crude, harsh, and unimaginative visitors from the States with fellow countrymen of theirs whose social discipline has been quite different—who belong, in European terms, to another class entirely. It is extraordinarily hard for many people, both here and abroad, to adjust themselves to the fact that the prime characteristic of the American scene is a broadening of opportunity, and that the first fruits of a broadening of opportunity may not be a lowered voice and a suitable deference toward unfamiliar customs.

So let us begin by giving the floor to a man who may be relied upon not to slip into these pitfalls, yet who nevertheless takes a hard view of what the past half century has done to his country.

"At the beginning of 1950," writes Bruce Bliven in his introduction to the book *Twentieth Century Unlimited,* "many newspapers

and magazines . . . published elaborate reviews of the years since 1900, liberally illustrated with the quaint costumes of the McKinley era, with bicycle parades, barber-shop quartets with handlebar mustaches, and the earliest automobiles struggling along highways deep in mud. None of them, so far as I am aware, discussed what seems to me the most significant fact about the changes in the past half century—the alteration in the moral climate from one of overwhelming optimism to one which comes pretty close to despair.

"Half a century ago, mankind, and especially the American section of mankind, was firmly entrenched in the theory that this is the best of all possible worlds and getting better by the minute. . . . There was a kindly God in the heavens, whose chief concern was the welfare, happiness, and continuous improvement of mankind, though his ways were often inscrutable."

Today, continues Mr. Bliven, we have lost this faith and are "frightened to death"—of war, atom bombs, and the looming prospect of a general brutalization and deterioration of the human species.

Have we, then, become an irreligious and rudderless people?

Church statistics do not help us far toward an answer to this question. They show steady gains in membership for most church groups, roughly comparable to the gain in population; but they are suspect because of a very human tendency to keep on the rolls people who never go to church any more except for weddings and funerals, and there is no way of knowing whether the compilers of church statistics have become more or less scrupulous in the past few decades. My own definite impression is that during the first thirty or forty years of the half century there was a pretty steady drift away from church attendance and from a feeling of identification with the church and its creed and institutions, at least on the part of well-to-do Americans (except perhaps among the Roman Catholics, who were under an exceptionally rigid discipline). It became customary among larger and larger numbers of the solid citizenry of the land to sleep late on Sunday morning and then grapple with the increasing poundage of the Sunday paper, or have a 10:30 appointment at the first tee, or drive over to the Joneses' for midday cocktails, or pack the family into the car for a jaunt to the shore or the hills. I myself, mak-

ing many week-end visits every year over several decades, noted that as time went on it was less and less likely that my host would ask on Saturday evening what guests were planning to go to church the next morning; that by the nineteen-twenties or thirties it was generally assumed that none would be. And although the households in which I visited may not have been representative, they at least were of more or less the same types throughout this whole period. Today I should imagine that in the heavy out-of-town traffic on a Friday afternoon there are not many people who will be inside a church on Sunday morning.

It has been my further observation that during at least the first thirty and perhaps the first forty years of the century there was an equally steady drift away from a sense of identification with the faiths for which the churches stood. Among some people there was a feeling that science, and in particular the doctrine of evolution, left no room for the old-time God, and that it was exceedingly hard to imagine any sort of God who was reconcilable with what science was demonstrating and would at the same time be at home in the local church. Among others there was a rising moral impatience with an institution which seemed to pay too much attention to the necessity of being unspotted by such alleged vices as drinking, smoking, card playing, and Sunday golfing, and too little to human brotherhood; the churches, or many of them, made a resolute effort to meet this criticism by becoming complex institutions dedicated to social service and the social gospel, with schools, classes, women's auxiliaries, young people's groups, sports, and theatricals, but not many of them held their whole congregations—at least on Sunday morning. Still others felt that the clergy were too deferential to wealthy parishioners of dubious civic virtue, or too isolated from the main currents of life. And among many there was a vague sense that the churches represented an old-fashioned way of living and thinking and that modern-minded people were outgrowing their influence. And as the feeling of compulsion to be among the churchgoers and church workers weakened, there were naturally many to whom the automobile or the

country club or the beach or an eleven o'clock breakfast was simply too agreeable to pass up.

Whether or not this drift away from formal religion is still the prevailing tide, there was manifest during the nineteen-forties a counter-movement. In many men and women it took no more definite form than an uneasy conviction that in times of stress and anxiety there was something missing from their lives: they wished they had something to tie to, some faith that would give them a measure of inner peace and security. The appearance on the best-seller lists of such books as *The Robe, The Cardinal, Peace of Mind,* and *The Seven Storey Mountain* indicated a widespread hunger and curiosity. Some returned to the churches—or entered them for the first time. In families here and there one noted a curious reversal: parents who had abandoned the church in a mood of rebellion against outworn ecclesiastical customs found their children in turn rebelling against what seemed to them the parents' outworn pagan customs. The Catholic Church in particular made many converts, many of them counter-rebels of this sort, and spectacularly served as a haven for ex-Communists who swung all the way from one set of disciplinary bonds to another. Whether the incoming tide was yet stronger than the outgoing one, or what the later drift would be, was still anybody's guess at the mid-century; but at least there was, and is, a confusion in the flow of religous feeling and habit.

Meanwhile, in quantities of families, the abandonment of church allegiance had deprived the children of an occasionally effective teacher of decent behavior. Some parents were able to fill the vacuum themselves; others were not, and became dismayed that their young not only did not recognize Bible quotations but had somehow missed out on acquiring a clear-cut moral code. Looking round for someone to blame for what had happened, such parents were likely to fasten upon the public schools, arguing that to all their other duties the schools must add the task of moral instruction. There were other parents whose conscientious study of psychological principles, including the Freudian, and whose somewhat imperfect digestion of the ideas of progressive educators so filled them with uncertainty as to

what moral teachings to deliver, and whether any sort of discipline might not damage young spirits, that these young spirits became—at least for the time being—brats of a singular offensiveness. And even if there had always been brats in the world, it was easy for observers of such families to conclude that moral behavior was indeed deteriorating, and that basketball scandals and football scandals and teen-age holdup gangs and official corruption in Washington were all signs of a widespread ethical decay.

This conclusion was and is of doubtful validity, I am convinced. There has probably never been a generation some members of which did not wonder whether the next generation was not bound for hell in a handcar. It may be argued that at the mid-century the manners of many teen-agers have suffered from their mothers' and fathers' disbelief in stern measures; but that their ethical standards are inferior, by and large, to those of their predecessors seems to me doubtful indeed. As for today's adults, there are undoubtedly many whose lack of connection with organized religion has left them without any secure standards; but as I think of the people I have actually known over a long period of time, I detect no general deterioration of the conscience: those I see today do a good many things that their grandparents would have considered improper, but few things they would have regarded as paltry or mean. And there has been taking place among these people, and in the country at large, a change of attitude that I am convinced is of great importance. During the half century the answer to the ancient question, "Who is my neighbor?" has been receiving a broader and broader answer.

There are still ladies and gentlemen who feel that they are of the elect, and that the masses of their fellow countrymen are of negligible importance; but their snobbery is today less complacently assured, more defiant, than in the days when Society was a word to conjure with. The insect on the leaf is less often found "proclaiming on the too much life among his hungry brothers in the dust." There are still business executives with an inflated sense of their own value in the scheme of things, but the "studied insolence" which Mark Sullivan

noted among the coal operators of 1902 when confronted by the union representatives and the President of the United States, and which magnates often displayed on the witness stand in those days, is no longer to be seen (except perhaps among such underworld gentry as Mr. Frank Costello).

I recall a college classmate of mine who in 1912 said that he knew about a hundred of the five hundred members of his class, and although he knew it sounded snobbish, weren't those after all about all that mattered? His equivalent today might say such a thing, but pretty surely he would recognize as he did so that he was flying in the teeth of accepted opinion. People who today look at what were originally the servants' quarters in an old mansion, or even in a swank apartment of the 1920 vintage, are shocked at their meagerness: is it possible, they ask themselves, that decent men and women could have had such disregard for the human needs of men and women living cheek by jowl with them?

The concept of the national income, the idea of measuring the distribution of this income, the idea of the national economy as an entity affected by the economic behavior of every one of us, the very widespread interest in surveying sociologically the status of this and that group of Americans the country over, in the conviction that their fortunes are interdependent with ours: all these have developed during this half century. The ideal of equality of educational opportunity never before commanded such general acceptance. In previous chapters of this book I have tried to show that in recent years there has been a marked shift of attitudes toward our most disadvantaged group, the Negroes, and no less noticeably in the South than elsewhere; and that the concept of responsibility to the general public has become more and more widespread among the managers of pivotal businesses. The amount of time which individual men and women give to good works in the broadest sense—including church work, volunteer hospital work, parent-teacher associations, the Boy Scouts, the Red Cross, the League of Women Voters, local symphony orchestras, the World Federalists, the American Legion, the service activities of Rotary, and so on endlessly—is in its total incalculable.

(There are communities, I am told, where the number of people who engage in money raising for the churches is larger than the number of churchgoers.) In sum, our sense of public obligation has expanded.

The change has had its amusing aspects. There comes to one's mind Anne Cleveland's cartoon of a Vassar girl dining with her parents and exclaiming, "How can I explain the position of organized labor to Father when you keep passing me chocolate sauce?" One thinks of a banker's daughter of one's acquaintance, who in her first job was much more deeply interested in the plight of the file clerks, whom she regarded as underpaid, than in helping the company make money. And of the receipt by Dr. Ralph Bunche, in the spring of 1951, of no less than thirteen honorary degrees in rapid succession, the singular unanimity of his choice by so many institutions undoubtedly reflecting in part a delight at finding an unexceptionable opportunity to pay tribute to a Negro.

That the change should meet, here and there, with heated resistance, is likewise natural. The democratic ideal imposes a great strain upon the tolerance and understanding of humankind. So we find a conscious and active anti-Semitism invading many a suburban community which once took satisfaction in its homogeneity and now finds it can no longer live to itself; or a savage anti-Negro feeling rising in an industrial town in which Negroes were formerly few and far between. And here one should add a footnote about the behavior of our armed forces abroad. For a variety of not easily defined reasons —including undoubtedly the traditionally proletarian position of the foreign-language-speaking immigrant in the United States—there is an obscure feeling among a great many Americans that the acceptance of the principle of human dignity stops at the water's edge: that a man who would be fiercely concerned over an apparent injustice to a fellow private in the American Army may be rude to Arabs, manhandle Koreans, and cheat Germans, and not lose status thereby—and this, perhaps, at the very moment when his representatives in Congress are appropriating billions for the aid of the very sorts of people of whom he is so scornful.

Yet in spite of these adverse facts there has been, I am convinced, an increasing overall acceptance in America of what Dr. Frank

Tannenbaum has called "the commitment to equality . . . spiritual equality." Whether this rising sense of identity of interest with our fellow citizens should be labeled as religious, as Dr. Tannenbaum and other speakers seemed to feel at the Waldorf Round Table of April, 1951, seems to me a matter of playing with words. Whether, as Walter H. Wheeler, Jr., suggested at that meeting, we may be "depleting and living off inherited spiritual capital, to put it in business language," is far from certain. Yet at any rate this may be said: If we as a people do not obey the first and great commandment as numerously and fervently as we used to, at least we have been doing fairly well with the second.

II

We come now to another question to which the answer must be even more two-sided and uncertain. Does the all-American standard, the all-American culture to which I devoted Chapter 15, threaten quality? Are we achieving a mass of second-rate education, second-rate culture, second-rate thinking, and squeezing out the first-rate?

The charge that we are indeed doing this comes in deafening volume. To quote no less a sage than T. S. Eliot: "We can assert with some confidence that our own period is one of decline; that the standards of culture are lower than they were fifty years ago; and that the evidences of this decline are visible in every department of human activity." And if this seems a rather general indictment, without special reference to the United States, it may be added that Mr. Eliot has given abundant evidence that he is out of sympathy with the American trend, preferring as he does a "graded society" in which "the lower class still exists."

One could pile up a mountain of quotations by critics of the American drift, playing the changes upon the two notions that, according to C. Hartley Grattan, account for the *Katzenjammer* of American writers today:

> (1) a feeling . . . that the values by which men have lived these many years are today in an advanced state of decomposition, with no replacements in sight; and (2) that whatever a man's private values may be, he

cannot expect in any case consistently to act on them successfully because the individual is, in the present-day world, at the mercy of ever more oppressive and arbitrary institutions.

In other words, that the man of original bent—the writer, painter, musician, architect, philosopher, or intellectual or spiritual pioneer or maverick of any sort—not only faces what Eugene O'Neill called the "sickness of today," which in Lloyd Morris's phrasing has "resulted from the death of the old God and the failure of science and materialism to give any satisfactory new one," but must also confront a world in which the biggest rewards for literary creation go to manufacturers of sexy costume romances; in which the Broadway theater, after a glorious period of fresh creation in the nineteen-twenties, is almost in the discard, having succumbed to the high cost of featherbedding labor and the competition of the movies; in which the movies in their turn, after a generation of richly recompensing those who could attract audiences by the millions and stifling those whose productions had doubtful box-office value, are losing ground to television; in which the highest television acclaim goes to Milton Berle rather than to Burr Tillstrom; and in which the poet finds his market well-nigh gone. One might sum up the charge in another way by saying that the dynamic logic of mass production, while serving admirably to bring us good automobiles and good nylons, enforces mediocrity on the market for intellectual wares.

This is a very severe charge. But there are a number of matters to be considered and weighed before one is ready for judgment upon it.

One is the fact that those who have most eloquently lamented the hard plight of the man or woman of creative talent have chiefly been writers, and more especially *avant-garde* writers and their more appreciative critics, and that the position occupied by these people has been a somewhat special one.

During the years immediately preceding World War I the inventers and innovators in American literature were in no such prevailing mood of dismay. On the contrary, they were having a high

old time. In Chicago, such men as Vachel Lindsay, Edgar Lee Masters, Sherwood Anderson, Ring Lardner, and Carl Sandburg were experimenting with gusto and confidence. In New York, the young Bohemians of Greenwich Village were hotly and rambunctiously enamored of a great variety of unorthodoxies, ranging from free verse, imagism, post-impressionism, cubism, and the realism of the "ashcan school" of art to woman suffrage, socialism, and communism (of an innocently idealistic variety compared with what later developed in Moscow). When Alfred Stieglitz preached modern art at "291," when the Armory Show was staged in 1913, when Max Eastman and John Reed crusaded for labor, when Floyd Dell talked about the liberation of literature, they saw before them a bright new world in which progress would in due course bring triumph to the wild notions of such heralds of the new enlightenment as themselves.

But World War I brought an immense disillusionment. No longer did the millennium seem just around the corner. And the prevailing mood shifted.

The novelists of the Lost Generation concentrated their attention upon the meannesses and cruelties of contemporary life, and often their keynote was one of despair. Mencken led a chorus of scoffers at American vulgarity and sentimentality, not indignantly but cynically; when asked why he continued to live in a land in which he found so little to revere, he asked, "Why do men go to zoos?" Sinclair Lewis lampooned Main Street and George F. Babbitt; Scott Fitzgerald underscored the baseness of respectable folk who went to Jay Gatsby's lavish parties and then deserted him in his hour of need. And many of the *avant-garde* and their admirers and imitators went to Paris, where Gertrude Stein said that "the future is not important any more," and Hemingway's characters in *The Sun Also Rises* acted as if it were not. But in a world without hope one could still cherish art, the one thing left that was worth while, keeping it aloof from politics and business; and one could particularly cherish that art which it was most difficult for the vulgarians of politics and business to comprehend. To these refugees from twentieth-century America "difficulty itself became a primary virtue," as Van Wyck Brooks has

remarked: they paid special homage to the aristocratic elaborations of Henry James, the subtleties of the recluse Marcel Proust, the scholarly allusiveness of Eliot, and the linguistic puzzles of Joyce. And a pattern was set, quite different from the pattern of 1910. To have a literary conscience was to take a bleak view of American life, human life in general, and the way the world was going; and also of the ability of any readers but a few to understand and appreciate true literary excellence.

This credo was to prove astonishingly durable. During the nineteen-thirties it had to contend with another emotional force. The economy had broken down, revolution was in the wind (or so it seemed to many at the time), and many writers felt a generous urge to condemn the cruelty of capitalism to "one-third of a nation," and to espouse the cause of embattled labor. Thus they abandoned hopelessness for militance. There was an outpouring of proletarian novels by writers whose first-hand knowledge of factory workers was highly limited. Yet even among many of the writers and critics who were most valiant in support of the common man there remained a conviction that the man of sensibility and integrity must inevitably write in terms intelligible only to the very uncommon man; and we beheld the diverting spectacle of authors and students of advanced composition returning from mass meetings held on behalf of sharecroppers and Okies to pore over the sacred texts of Henry James, who would have ignored sharecroppers, and Eliot, who was certainly out of tune with the Okies.

During World War II the impulse to defend labor turned into an impulse to defend the G.I. against the military brass. The older impulse to depict the world as a dismal place turned into an impulse to show how brutal men at war could be (including, often, the very G.I. who was supposed to engage the reader's sympathy); and the belief that quality was bound to go unappreciated by all but a very few turned into a general pessimism over the future of culture, a pessimism that seemed almost to welcome defeat for any sort of excellence.

"It must be highly embarrassing (at least I hope it is)," wrote W. H. Auden in 1948, "for living American novelists to be told . . .

that they have produced the only significant literature between the two wars. . . . Coming from Europe, my first, my strongest, my most abiding impression is that no body of literature, written at any time or in any place, is so uniformly depressing. It is a source of continual astonishment to me that the nation which has the world-wide reputation of being the most optimistic, the most gregarious, and the freest on earth should see itself through the eyes of its most sensitive members as a society of helpless victims, shady characters, and displaced persons. . . . In novel after novel one encounters heroes without honor or history; heroes who succumb so monotonously to temptation that they cannot truly be said to be tempted at all; heroes who, even if they are successful in a worldly sense, remain nevertheless but the passive recipients of good fortune; heroes whose sole moral virtue is a stoic endurance of pain and disaster."

Could it be that such novelists have been following a fashion set longer ago than they realize? That one reason why sales of novels in very recent years have been disappointing is that, as Mr. Grattan has suggested, "contemporary writers appear to have given up before contemporary readers are ready to do so," and that perhaps the readers are today ahead of the writers? That the continuing notion among many advanced writers that only difficult writing is good writing has led them to pay too little attention to the art of communicating with numerous readers who may not be such oafs as they suppose? And that a sort of contagion of defeatism among literary folk today should lead one to accept with a certain reserve their unhappy conclusions concerning the state of American culture?

Let us note their laments and look a little further.

III

One like myself who has worked for a great many years for a magazine which nowadays can pay its authors no more than it did a decade ago, because it has to pay its typographers and shipping men so much more, is not likely to be complacent about the lot of the man of letters today. Nor is one who has felt he was waging a steady uphill fight on behalf of what he perhaps fondly considered distinguished journalism—uphill because there were constantly appearing

new magazines aimed at readers by the millions, and because advertisers tended to want to reach those millions—going to be complacent about the condition of literary institutions. It seems to me undeniable that the great success of the mass-circulation magazines and the rise of the staff-written magazines have between them made it harder for the free-lance author who lacks the popular touch and who will not do potboiling, or cannot do it successfully, and who has no other assured source of income, to live comfortably. But then he almost never has had things very easy financially. And there is this to be said: one reason why magazines with severely high standards find the going difficult is that they have no monopoly of material of high quality, for during the past few decades an increasing amount of such material has been finding a place in the mass periodicals. (For a couple of random examples, let me cite Winston Churchill's memoirs, appearing in *Life*, and Faulkner's short stories, coming out in the *Saturday Evening Post.*) Furthermore, the number of writers of talent who made good incomes by writing for the mass magazines without the sacrifice of an iota of their integrity is much larger than one might assume from the talk of the *avant-gardists.* The picture is a mixed one.

So too with regard to books. The market for the output of the "original" publishers, meaning those who sell newly-written books at standard prices, chiefly through the bookstores, is somewhat larger than before the war, but it is manifest that price increases, reflecting high labor costs, have deterred many buyers. The share of a few very successful writers in the total authors' revenue increases; and it becomes more difficult than it used to be for those whose books are not likely to sell more than a few thousand copies (these include nearly all poets) to get their work accepted. Yet here again the situation is not as black as it has been painted. I agree with Bernard DeVoto that no book really worth publishing fails of publication by some unit of a very diversified industry; and I would add that while there is trash on the best-seller lists, most of the books which reach those lofty positions, with very pleasant results for their authors' pocketbooks, are among the best of their time.

And there is more to it than this. For there are also numerous book clubs, at least two of which sell books by the hundreds of thousands each month. There are the quarterly Condensed Books brought out by the *Reader's Digest*—four or five novels or nonfiction books condensed in one volume—which, launched in 1950, were selling by early 1952 at the rate of more than a million apiece. And there are the paper-bound reprint houses, whose volumes, priced at twenty-five or thirty-five cents for the newsstand and drugstore trade, are bought in phenomenal lots. In the year 1950 the total was no less than 214 million; in 1951 the figure had jumped to 231 million.

Two-thirds or more of these paper-bound books, to be sure, were novels or mysteries—thus falling into classifications too inclusive to be reassuring as to the public taste—and some were rubbish by any tolerable standard (the publishers of such wares having learned, as one cynic has put it, that you can sell almost anything adorned on the cover with a picture connoting sex or violence, or preferably both, as in a picture of a luscious girl getting her dress ripped off by a gunman). But consider these sales figures (as of January 1952) for a few paper-bound books: Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, in play form, over half a million; George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four*, over three-quarters of a million; Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*, over a million and a quarter; Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture*, 400,000; and—to cite an incontrovertibly classical example—a translation of *The Odyssey* (with an abstract cover design), 350,000. And remember that these sales, which are above and beyond book-club sales and regular bookstore sales, have been achieved in a nation of avid magazine readers. It is true that the financial returns to the author from such low-priced books are meager: he gets less revenue from a million of them than from 20,000 sold at standard prices. Nevertheless there is an interesting phenomenon here. There is a big American market for good writing if it and the price are within easy reach.

Let us look at the market for art. The painter of today faces two great difficulties. The first is that his work is offered to the public

at high prices (if he can get any price at all) because he can sell only his original work, to one collector or institution, and cannot dispose of thousands at a time; and collectors with ample money are scarce. The second is that the abler young painters of the day have mostly swung all the way to the abstract, which to most potential buyers is about as comprehensible as contemporary poetry. Yet the signs of interest among the public are striking. Forbes Watson is authority for the statement that there were more sales of paintings in the nineteen-forties than in all the previous history of the United States; that in the year 1948 there were a hundred exhibitions of American art in American museums; and that the total attendance at art exhibitions that year was over 50 million. One should also take note of the greatly enlarged number of local museums; of the lively promotion of an interest in art by many universities and colleges; the rising sale of reproductions, in book form and otherwise; and also the recent sharp increase in the number of Sunday amateur dabblers with a paintbrush. Lyman Bryson reports that the lowest estimate he has been able to find of the number of people who paint in the United States today is 300,000. And the Department of Commerce says that the sales of art supplies went up from four million dollars in 1939 to forty million in 1949—a tremendous leap. The suspicion comes over one that there is something stirring here, too, and that the plight of the contemporary artist, like the plight of the contemporary writer, may be partly due to the fact that the market for his output may not yet be geared to the potential demand.

We turn to music—and confront an astonishing spectacle.

In 1900 there was only a handful of symphony orchestras in the country; by May 1951 there were 659 "symphonic groups"—including 32 professional, 343 community, 231 college, and a scattering of miscellaneous amateur groups. Fifteen hundred American cities and towns now support annual series of concerts. Summer music festivals attract audiences which would have been unimaginable even thirty years ago. To quote Cecil Smith,

> The dollar-hungry countries of Europe are setting up music festivals by the dozen, not to give American tourists the music they would not hear at

home, but to make sure they do not stay at home because of the lack of music in Europe. The programs at Edinburgh, Strasbourg, Amsterdam, Florence, and Aix-en-Provence are designed as competition for Tanglewood, Bethlehem, Ravinia, the Cincinnati Zoo, and the Hollywood Bowl.

Mr. Smith cites further facts of interest: that the Austin, Texas, symphony recently took over a drive-in movie for outdoor summer concerts; that Kentucky hill people come in their bare feet when the Louisville orchestra plays in Berea; and that "an all-Stravinsky program, conducted by the composer, strikes Urbana, Illinois, as a perfectly normal attraction."

A good deal of the credit for this extraordinary state of affairs goes to the radio. The first network broadcast of a symphony orchestra was held in 1926, the first sponsored one came in 1929, the Metropolitan Opera was put on the air in 1931, and Toscanini was engaged as conductor of the NBC orchestra in 1937; by 1938 it was estimated that the Music Appreciation Hour, conducted by Walter Damrosch, was being heard each week by seven million children in some 70,000 schools, and that the Ford Sunday Evening Hour, featuring the Detroit Symphony, was fifth among all radio programs in popularity. Millions upon millions of people were getting music of all sorts—popular, jazz, and classical—in such quantity, year after year, that businessmen and housewives and school children who had never until a few years earlier heard a symphony orchestra or a string quartet were getting an ample opportunity to find out for themselves whether "Roll Out the Barrel" or "One O'Clock Jump" or Beethoven's Seventh sounded best on a fifth or tenth hearing. In the late nineteen-forties the radio network production of classical music began to weaken as television made spectacular inroads upon the radio business; but long before this another way of communicating music had jumped into prominence.

During the nineteen-twenties the phonograph record business had been threatened with virtual extinction by the rise of radio. But presently it began to expand: people who had developed a lively interest in music began to want it on their own terms. The expansion was accelerated by the wild vogue of jazz, whose more serious votaries

soon learned that if you were to become a really serious student of what Benny Goodman and Duke Ellington were producing, you must collect old recordings and become a connoisseur of Handy, Beiderbecke, and Armstrong. By the nineteen-forties, young people who in earlier years would have gone off dancing of an evening were finding that it was very agreeable to sit on the floor and listen to a record-player, with a few bottles of beer to wash the music down. Many whose taste in books and in art was very limited were not only becoming able to identify the most famous symphonies by their first few notes, but were developing a pride in their acquaintance with the works of Bach's obscure contemporaries, and in their connoisseurship of the comparative merits of recordings by various orchestras. A very rough estimate of the sales of records during the year 1951, made by *Billboard* magazine, put the grand total at some 190 million—more than one for every man, woman, and child in the United States—and the total sale of record in the "classical" category at perhaps ten to fifteen per cent of that 190 million: let us say something like twenty to thirty million classical records. To give a single example: as many as 20,000 sets of Wanda Landowska's harpsichord recordings of the Goldberg Variations were sold during the first three months after they were issued. And a shrewd student of American culture tells me that as he goes about the United States he keeps being told, in place after place, "Our town is sort of unusual. I suppose the most exciting thing, to us, that's going on here isn't anything in business but the way we've put over our symphony orchestra (or our string quartet, or our community chorus)."

Verily, as one looks about the field of the arts, the picture is confused. Here is an incredible boom in public interest in music, along with expanding audiences for the ballet, old-style and new-style. Here is the Broadway theater almost ready for the pulmotor—and local civic theaters and college theaters in what look like a promising adolescence. Here are the movies, beloved by millions (and berated by highbrow critics) for decades, losing audiences little by little to television, which has not yet outgrown a preposterous crudity. Here

is architecture, which has outgrown its earlier imitation of old European styles and is producing superb industrial buildings along with highly experimental and sometimes absurd modern residences —while the peripheries of our great cities, whether New York or Chicago or St. Louis or Los Angeles, display to the bus traveler from airport to town almost no trace of the handiwork of any architects at all. Here are lovely (if monotonous) motor parkways—and along the other main highways a succession of roadtown eyesores (garages, tourist courts, filling stations, billboards, second-hand auto salesrooms, junk dealers, and more billboards) which make the motor parkways seem, by contrast, like avenues for escapists.

Is not the truth of the situation perhaps something like this: Here is a great nation which is conducting an unprecedented experiment. It has made an incredible number of people, previously quite unsophisticated and alien to art or contemptuous of it, prosperous by any previous standard known to man. These multitudes offer a huge market for him who would sell them equipment or entertainment that they can understand and enjoy. To compare them with the people who in other lands have been lovers and students of literature and the arts is grossly unfair. They are not an elite, but something else again. Let us say it in italics: *This is something new; there has never been anything like it before.*

The job before those Americans who would like to see the United States a Greece rather than a Carthage is to try to develop, alongside the media of entertainment and equipment which satisfy these people's present needs, others which will satisfy more exacting tastes and will be on hand for them when they are ready for more rewarding fare. The problem is an economic one as well as an artistic one. Whether it can be solved is still anybody's guess. But in a day when, despite the discouragement of many literati, much of the best writing in the world is being done in the United States; when the impoverishment of foreign institutions of learning has made American universities no mere followers on the road of learning, but leaders despite themselves, attracting students from many continents; and when, willy nilly, a burden of responsibility for the cultural condition of the

world rests heavily upon America, it should do us good to look at the army of music lovers that we have produced. For if this is what auspicious economic conditions can bring in the area of one of the great arts, possibly the miracle may be effected elsewhere too, and the all-American culture may prove to have been, not the enemy of excellence, but its seed-bed.

Walt Whitman saw the possibilities when he wrote, fancifully depicting the arrival of the muse, a migrant from ancient Greece to the New World:

> By thud of machinery and shrill steam-whistle undismay'd,
> Bluff'd not a bit by drain-pipe, gasometers, artificial fertilizers;
> Smiling and pleas'd with palpable intent to stay,
> She's here, install'd amid the kitchen-ware!

IV

Yet there is still another question to ask.

The other day, running through some old papers of mine, I came upon a copy of a Commencement address I had once delivered. It was entitled "In a Time of Apprehension," and in it I had spoken of the fact that many people were feeling a "sense of doom, a sense of impending disaster." A good deal of what I had said then seemed to me, as I reread the address, to fit the mood of the mid-century. But the date on the manuscript was June, 1938—not only before the atom bomb and the Cold War, but before World War II.

Since much longer ago than that there has been from time to time in the minds of many Americans a feeling of uneasy tension, combined often with one of frustration: a feeling that mighty, unmanageable forces might be taking one toward that "impending disaster," and there was nothing one could do about it. In general one might ascribe this mental state to the difficulty of adjusting ourselves emotionally to life in what Graham Wallas called the "Great Society" —a complex society in which the fate of a Kansas farmer or a Syracuse druggist may be determined by a break in the New York stock market, or a government decision in Washington, or an invasion in Korea. But more specifically there was first the World War of 1914-

of the young rebels had embraced—or at least dallied with—communism because they saw it as the end-station of the road of disillusionment. First one saw that the going order was not working right; then one progressed to the consideration of reforms . . . and decided that half-measures would not suffice to redeem America; one went on to the idea that nothing short of revolution would serve; and there at the terminus of one's journey sat Karl Marx waiting to ask one's unquestioning devotion, there was the Communist Party promising to make a clean sweep of all that was hateful in American life. How welcome to find the end of the road, how easy to be able to ascribe everything one disliked to capitalism!"

So things looked to most of those who got hooked. Many of them unhooked themselves when the 180-degree turns in Communist policy in 1939 and 1941 made it clear to anyone in his senses that the Party was in absolute subjection to a cynical foreign power; but others could not or would not, and continued their machinations under such clever disguises that so highly placed an innocent as Henry A. Wallace could as late as 1948 be deluded into imagining that he was not being used by them for their conspiratorial purposes.

Because the Communist party was conspiratorial and imposed secrecy upon its members, the job of ferreting them out of government departments, and organizations for the support of this or that public policy, and labor unions, was difficult. Because a great many fine, patriotic people had worked in these departments or organizations or unions, it was almost inevitable that some of these people too should come under suspicion. Because Communists were accustomed to lying about their connections, the question naturally arose whether these loyal citizens, too, might not be lying when they affirmed their loyalty. Because American foreign policy had not prevented the build-up of Soviet power, or the victory of the Chinese Communists over the Chiang Kai-shek government, a further question arose in many suspicious minds: were these people about whom they had their doubts responsible for the insecure plight of America and the uncertainty in which we were all living? Because most of the converts to communism had been radicals, and they had infiltrated most suc-

cessfully into radical or liberal organizations, the suspicion took another form in undiscriminating minds: anybody who had any ideas which looked queer to his neighbors might be a Communist, or something like a Communist. And because these suspicions were rife, there was a wide-open chance for zealots (of whom the most furious were some of the very people who had got hooked in the nineteen-thirties, and were working out a savage atonement for their error) and for ambitious politicians to brand many decent and conscientious citizens as virtual traitors, thus placing upon them a stigma which they might never live down. The chain of circumstances that had begun with Communist secrecy reached very far indeed.

And it has reached even farther than that. For, as a result of the inquisitions of various congressional committees, and the government loyalty checks, and the strange drama of Alger Hiss, and the fulminations of Senator McCarthy, and the terrorization of parts of the entertainment world by the publication of *Red Channels*, and the charges made against many school and college teachers, a great many useful and productive people have been frightened into a nervous conformity. If a college instructor, lecturing on economic theory, reaches the point in his lecture where he should explain the respects in which Karl Marx was right in his economic diagnosis, he is in a dither: suppose some neurotic student should report that he is teaching communism? If a schoolteacher so much as mentions Russia, she wonders what tongues may start wagging in the Parent-Teacher Association. If a businessman gets in the mail an appeal for funds for European refugees, he looks uneasily at the letterhead and wonders if it may represent some group he'd rather not get entangled with. If a politician running for the city council campaigns for better housing, he knows well that his opponent will probably call his proposal "communistic," or at any rate "leftist"—an inclusive term which might be applied to almost anything, but has vaguely opprobrious overtones and may lose him votes by the thousands. At many a point in American life, adventurous and constructive thought is stifled by apprehension.

That behind this uneasy scapegoat hunting is the sense of frustration produced by living under the tensions of an uneasy day was manifest during the uproar over the removal of General MacArthur in the spring of 1951. For perhaps the most striking thing about that great debate was not the speeches and counter-speeches, or the interminable sessions of the Joint Congressional Committee which interviewed officials at length, but the floods of venomous letters received by newspaper editors and radio commentators who did not favor the great General. It was almost as if some wellspring of poison had been tapped. One realized then how many people there were whom the state of international affairs generally, and the war in Korea in particular, had strained beyond their endurance: they had to throw something at somebody, in a paroxysm of anger. The outright expression of this rancor was short-lived, and when Bobby Thomson hit his home run, and whole communities were all just Giant fans and Dodger fans again, one could recognize once more the familiar good humor of the American democracy. Yet the basic question remained: How can we maintain mutual trust, and an invigorating freedom of thought and expression, in a nation which for an indefinite time must carry heavy and uncertain responsibilities abroad, and meanwhile be unrelaxed in its armed strength?

We are by nature a sanguine people, but never before have we been subjected to the sort of prolonged strain that we feel today, and our patience, humor, and courage are being sorely tested.