

THE NATIONAL IDEA IN AMERICAN CRITICISM

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I

ONE hundred and ten years ago, newly returned from a wander year in Europe, William Ellery Channing took stock of the national literature and foretold its future. It was just before the dawn of The Golden Day. Emerson was an assistant in his brother's school; Longfellow and Hawthorne were undergraduates at Bowdoin; Poe was a schoolboy in Richmond; Lowell, Melville and Whitman, all children of that marvellous year 1819, were learning to read. Apart from Franklin and Edwards, Channing found no great figures in the past of American literature, and in the spate of excuses for the mediocrity of American writing he discerned but one significant truth: "our consciousness of having failed to make important contributions to the interests of the intellect". The absence of such contributions he put down to two causes. "It is the ordinance of God and one of his most benevolent laws", he declared, "that the human race should be carried forward by impulses which originate in a few minds, perhaps in an individual". In defiance of this law "the idea of forming a superior race of men has entered little into schemes of policy" in America. Much, Channing pointed out, had been done to promote elementary education, little to provide "for the liberal training of the intellect, for forming great scholars, for communicating that profound knowledge and that thirst for higher truths which can alone originate a commanding literature". In such a misconception of the national good, the outcome of an over literal belief in democracy and equality, Channing found the major cause of what he deplored. There was, however, another cause—a phenomenon of which Channing's recent trip to Europe must have made him more sharply aware: "In an age of great intellectual activity", he complained, "we rely chiefly for intellectual excitement and enjoyment on foreign minds. . . . we mean not to be paradoxical, but we believe that it would be better to admit no books from abroad than to make them substitutes for our own intellectual activity. . . . We are more and more a reading people. Books are already among the most powerful

influences here. The question is, shall Europe, through these, fashion us after its pleasure. Shall America be only an echo of what is thought and written under the aristocracies beyond the ocean?" Lucidly and eloquently, as befitted the greatest preacher of his day, the man who, as Mr. Van Wyck Brooks remarks, had awakened Boston as no one had ever awakened it before, Channing drove home his conviction that a culture which is colonial and purely assimilative is a culture without dignity and without energy.

As strong as Channing's discontent with the past was his hope in the future:

We believe that a literature springing up in this new soil would bear new fruits, and, in some respects, more precious fruits than are elsewhere produced. We know that our hopes may be set down to the account of that national vanity which, with too much reason, is placed by foreigners among our besetting sins. . . we are inclined to believe that we occupy a position from which the great subjects of literature may be viewed more justly than from those which foreign nations hold. . . Man is the great subject of literature, and juster and profounder views of man may be expected here than elsewhere. In Europe, political and artificial distinctions have, more or less, triumphed over and obscured our common nature. In Europe, we meet kings, nobles, priests, peasants. How much rarer it is to meet *men*; by which we mean human beings conscious of their nature, conscious of the utter worthlessness of all outward distinctions, compared with what is treasured up in their own souls. . . Man is not hidden from us by so many disguises as in the Old World. The essential equality of all human beings, founded on the possession of a spiritual, progressive, immortal nature, is, we hope, better understood; and nothing more than this single conviction is needed to work the mightiest changes in every province of human life and human thought.

The study of what is deepest in the nature of man, of what is most general and essential in his being—this, then, is what Channing proposes to the writers of America as at once the province of literature in which the greatest victories are to be won, and that for the conquest of which the national idea and the political and social environment best equip them.

II

"Conformity", he said, "benumbs and cramps genius and creative power. What faculties slumber within, weighed down by the chains of custom!" There is the germ of Emerson's attitude, and Channing is indeed the most immediate influence among

Emerson's masters. Still, like another Abelard, Emerson rapidly outgrew his master, and belittled him as one whose genius lacked "nerve and dagger". In Emerson's mind the doctrines of Channing took a greater force and colour. The sympathy with anarchism, which seemed innocuous when enfolded in the Augustan regularity of Channing's prose, shocked and excited when formulated in Emerson's oracular and laconic idiom. Emerson was to be the most effective anarchist American literature has ever known. An anarchist in his conception of character: "Man" he said, "is a faggot of thunderbolts". An anarchist in his conception of thought: "I do not know", he said, "what arguments mean in reference to any expression of a thought". An anarchist in his conception of the state: he spoke of "a man's equality to the church, his equality to the state, and his equality to every other man". Grounding himself upon this, he protested against a law which outraged him, in terms which suggest the soap-box rather than the manse: "This filthy enactment was made in the nineteenth century by people who could read and write. I will not obey it, by God".

The wittiest of Emerson's expositors, Dr. Samuel Crothers, remarks: "As Daniel in Babylon prayed with his windows opened toward Jerusalem, so the Boston *literati* when they took pen in hand wrote with their study windows open toward London." Emerson, always superior to his associates, may be said to have sealed his eastern windows and taken out the western wall of his study. He sought, as he wrote to Margaret Fuller, to cast out the passion for Europe by the passion for America; "Our reverence for Cambridge, which is only a part of our reverence for London," must, he added, "be transferred across the Allegheny ridge".

As an anarchist, he was blithe in rejecting the authority of the past; and in his time and place the past meant supremely the English tradition. He once burst out:

As long as our people quote English standards, they dwarf their own proportions. A Western lawyer of eminence said to me he wished it were a penal offence to bring an English law-book into Court in this country, so pernicious had he found in his experience our deference to English precedent. The very word commerce has only an English meaning, and is pinched to the cramp exigencies of English experience. The commerce of rivers, the commerce of railways, and who knows but the commerce of air-balloons must give an American extension to the pond-hole of admiralty. As long as our people quote English standards, they will miss the sovereignty of power.

The principle of American activity must, he thought, emerge from the national life: foreign principles suffer sea-change, and in America

are flat and sterile. Emerson appears to echo Burke: the great anarchist and the great conservative meet in the insistence that the effective principle is that which is congruent with "the true *nature* and the peculiar *circumstances* of the object which we have before us". Seeking to suggest the ideal principle of American legislation, Emerson says in one of his addresses:

To men legislating for the area betwixt the two oceans, betwixt the snows and the tropics, somewhat of the grandeur of nature will infuse itself into the code. A heterogeneous population crowding on all ships from all corners of the world to the great gates of North America, namely Boston, New York and New Orleans, and thence proceeding inward to the prairie and the mountains, and quickly contributing their private thought to the public opinion, their toll to the treasury and their vote to the election, it cannot be doubted that the legislation of the country should become more catholic and cosmopolitan than that of any other.

It is the voice, the mood, of Whitman: the expansive nationalism, the strong sense of the physical reality of the republic, is something quite out of Channing's or Longfellow's range.

What, we must now enquire, were the implications for the national literature of Emerson's nationalism and anarchism? The now rather neglected essay entitled "The Poet" Mr. Ludwig Lewison describes as "a charter for American literature". "I am not wise enough," says Emerson in this essay, "for a national criticism"; but he belies his modesty. No precept or precedent has in his view real validity, for art is "organic" and in each of its realizations "totally new". All about him he saw men docile to the past and captious towards the present. "I look in vain", he confesses sadly, "for the poet whom I describe. We do not with sufficient plainness or sufficient profoundness address ourselves to life, nor dare we chant our own times and social circumstances. . . . We have yet had no genius in America with tyrannous eye, which knew the value of our incomparable materials, and saw in the barbarism and materialism of the times another carnival of the gods whose pictures he so much admires in Homer. . . . Banks and tariffs, the newspaper and the caucus, Methodism and Unitarianism are flat and dull to dull people, but rest on the same foundations of wonder as the town of Troy and the temple of Delphoi, and are as swiftly passing away". So he wrote not long before 1844, with his characteristic blend of anarchism, nationalism and pantheism: in a decade the poet, he foretold, with "tyrannous eye", knowing the aesthetic value of the "barbarism and materialism of the times", and "chanting banks and tariffs, the newspaper and

the caucus", was to burst into utterance. In no small measure he was to be the product of Emerson's criticism. "I was simmering and simmering", he was to say: "it was Emerson brought me to boil..." He boiled for more than twenty years.

III

In his early discourse "The American Scholar", Emerson must have appeared to those few among his auditors who understood his drift to be praying for the impossible. In a university ridden by what one of its professors in our time has called the theological nightmare, and obsequious to the mechanics of Greek and Latin studies, he had prophesied that the course of American education would require and develop a kind of scholar unknown to American experience. He would be a scholar who would reserve the study of books for his duller hours, who would care for the past simply as a preface to the present, who upon occasion would sally forth into the market-place and win there victories as complete as those of the lecture-hall, a scholar, finally, who would be a conscious part and interpreter of his particular time and place,—"not", as Emerson put it in a memorable and remembered phrase, "not a thinker, but a man thinking".

It was indeed a great deal to ask. Such scholars have never abounded anywhere. Speaking of the Harvard of 1870, when American scholars were already far in advance of those to whom Emerson addressed his reproaches and hopes, Henry Adams remarks that the Harvard faculty-room was "a social desert which would have starved a polar bear", and that "Harvard society was a faculty-meeting without business". Immense, then, was Emerson's good fortune in having in his audience that August evening one who was completely to satisfy the claims of the lecturer, claims at the very grandeur of which his spirit took fire. Writing twenty-eight years after the delivery of the address, this auditor says:

His oration was an event without any former parallel in our literary annals, a scene to be always treasured in the memory for its picturesqueness and its inspiration. What crowded and breathless aisles, what windows clustering with eager heads, what enthusiasm of approval, what grim silence of foregone dissent! It was our Yankee version of a lecture by Abelard, our Harvard parallel to the last public appearances of Schelling.

A few years later, in still more eager praise of another discourse, he says:

To some of us that long-past experience remains as the most marvellous and fruitful we have ever had. Emerson

awakened us, saved us from the body of this death... Did they say he was disconnected? So were the stars, that seemed larger to our eyes still keen with that excitement, as we walked homeward with prouder stride over the creaking snow.

In every detail the eulogist was to realize Emerson's hope: it is one of the rare instances of a lecture producing an adequate effect.

The mind of James Russell Lowell was not that of a prophet: Lowell could never have filled Emerson's seven-league boots. His was rather a mind vivacious, curious, civilized and learned to the point of being cluttered as an old attic. It was the mind needed to realize the national idea in Harvard. And it was radically American. His loyalty to America and his loyalty to Harvard were inseparable. The foundation of Harvard, he asserted in his anniversary address of 1886, "insured, and I believe was meant to insure, our intellectual independence of the Old World". "That independence", he continued, "has been long in coming, but it will come at last, and are not the names of the chiefest of those who have hastened its coming written on the rolls of Harvard College?" There is the distinctive Harvard touch. The insuring of the intellectual independence of America was, in Lowell's view, the chief business of Harvard: and the success of Harvard in this business was Lowell's ground for claiming that the foundation of Harvard was an event "second in real import to none that has happened in this western hemisphere".

He might be the most acceptable ambassador America had sent to the Court of St. James's: he might have the refusal of the chair of English at Oxford: he might understand the spirit of Spain by the interior line of genius: he might loiter in the boulevards of Paris with the aplomb of one born to their elegance and space; still, wherever he went and whatever he did, something of the air of Brattle Street clung to him, and he remained, in Henry James's phrase, "magnificently American". With pardonable pride he distinguishes himself as "the first poet who has endeavoured to express the American idea". It was his saturation with the American idea that enabled him to serve in his many functions, as poet, editor, critic, professor and ambassador—as a bridge across the Atlantic. As the American scholar his power lay in his conjunction with a technical finesse more exact than has usually been allowed of a mind which was vigorous enough and personal enough always to dominate the subject in hand in truly Emersonian fashion, kneading and moulding it for the uses of his time and his place, and achieving day after day, for book after book, a resurrection in the spirit.

A smaller man than Emerson, he was more immediately effective. Speaking of Milton's style in the *Areopagitica*, Mr. Middleton Murry complains: "The superb music is too dominant. The only debate that could really be conducted to such an accompaniment is a debate of archangels. . . One weeps tears of joy at the sheer beauty of the orchestration. But that is not the mood to appreciate a piece of political pleading". The complaint might well be addressed to much of Emerson's thinking and writing: a razor has been set to cut wood. Lowell's coarser instrument is more workmanlike; and more immediately influential than "The American Scholar" was that rollicking polemic "On a Certain Condescension in Foreigners".

Emerson frequently had to suffer the reproach of rusticity: at home and abroad there were those who thought that the sometime hog-reeve of Concord kept some savour of his occupation when he wrote. Dean Stanley records that he met Americans who shook their heads over Emerson's writing and declared it too *greeny*. Matthew Arnold, quoting the epithet, observes that at times Emerson wrote in a "style impossible to a born man of letters". In all of this there is a quantum of truth, and of that sort of truth specially obvious to Oxford and Harvard men. Lowell was an Emerson in frock coat and top-hat—the top-hat which once blew off into the Charles, carrying with it the latest batch of *Atlantic* manuscripts. If he was the worse for such a metamorphosis, he was also the better—as an ambassador to the Brahmins and the *patrons* and even, perhaps, in his later years to the southern gentry of this continent as well as to the cultivated world of Europe. Vulgarity, greenness or defective civilization were not reproaches one could hurl at the man whom the most civilized of all Americans, Henry James, praises in such words as these: "He carried style—the style of literature—into regions in which we rarely look for it: into politics, of all places in the world, into diplomacy, into stammering civic dinners, into ponderous anniversaries, into letters and notes and telegrams, into every turn of the hour—absolutely into conversation, where indeed it freely disguised itself as intensely colloquial wit". The judgment of Henry James on the quality of a man's civilization is as inappellable as the judgment of the Autocrat on the quality of his jokes. Through all of Lowell's writing, however, the native sap runs rich and fast. To adapt one of his own favorite quotations: "Doubtless God could have made a better American scholar, but doubtless he never did".

IV

In the early summer of 1855 Emerson received a copy of *Leaves of Grass*; and in reading the strange new work, he faced the decisive test of his critical faculty. Whittier flung his copy into the fire; Lowell sneered at the tramp-poet, the crony of cab-drivers, to the end of his life; could Emerson struggle free of the atmosphere of the Saturday Club, and recognize in the sympathetic paganism of Whitman the expansion of what he himself had done? Emerson was equal to the test: the language he used in thanking the unknown poet has a warmth and a positiveness rare in his critical pronouncements. "I find it", he says of the book, "the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed". And particularizing its excellences, he goes on to say: "It meets the demand I am always making of what seemed the sterile and stingy nature (of the American character), as if too much handiwork or too much lymph in temperament were making our western wits fat and mean". Not only to the author did Emerson sing the praises of *Leaves of Grass*: after a year's reflection he summoned up courage to send a copy of it to Carlyle, insisting that it "had terrible eyes and buffalo strength and was indisputably American". It is perhaps as well for Carlyle's critical reputation that no comment on Emerson's gift survives. Only one American showed a clearer sense than Emerson's of the virtue, of the "divine Newness" of *Leaves of Grass*: and we now know that the anonymous reviewer was Walt Whitman.

Emerson had aspired to Americanism: he had seen and proclaimed the danger to the national idea in the proud parochialism of Boston and of Concord. Not Edgar Allan Poe himself was more aware of the need to abandon the Saturday Club's conception of Boston as the cultural hub of the continent. On occasions Emerson could free his intelligence from the constricting grasp of local tradition and habit; but as a total being he could not free himself. Woodrow Wilson remarks that of the heroes of America few were genuinely or characteristically American: Washington an English gentleman, Jefferson a French ideologue, Lowell a Boston Brahmin, Emerson, even, at best a New Englander. In the little group centred about Abraham Lincoln to which Wilson confines the praise of genuine and characteristic Americanism, Whitman does not find a place. It would be surprising if he did—for a Princeton professor forty years ago Whitman must have been no more than an unpleasing memory. To our contemporary view, however, it is in Whitman's freedom from sectional bias, in his

ranging insatiable love of the heterogeneous mass of American trades, classes, races, regions, that his prophetic superiority to all his predecessors is most manifest. New York and New Orleans, Washington and Philadelphia and Chicago, and even Boston itself lie open to Whitman's contemplative regard and live abundantly in his poetry. As Sherman says, Whitman "goes abroad and picks up America bit by bit, from sea to sea, and declares for each morsel of it his unmitigated adoration." "It was the most cryingly needed service ever rendered to America by a man of letters." Not since Chaucer has there been in our language a poet with so broad and sure an experience of the life of his countrymen.

Unlike Emerson, Whitman had an acute political intelligence: he could frame a political ideal, and he could perceive clearly what it implied and what it excluded. *Leaves of Grass* is a political act. "No one" he insists towards the end of his life, "will get at my verses who insists upon viewing them as a literary performance, or attempt at such performance, or as aiming mainly toward art or aestheticism". And he proceeds to explain how he conceived his work and the service to which he dedicated it: "I say no land or people or circumstances ever existed so needing a race of singers and poems differing from all others and rigidly their own as the land and people and circumstances of our United States need such singers and poems to-day and for the future". Why rigidly their own and differing from all others?

Whitman strikes roots deep into the past: the primitive masters of all literatures are his familiars. About him there is nothing of the legendary vulgarian emitting barbaric yawps. This is the Whitman of caricature. In the *Song of the Exposition* he pays his homage to older civilizations:

We do not blame thee, elder world, nor really separate
ourselves from thee,
(Would the son separate himself from the father?)
Looking back on thee, seeing thee to thy duties, grandeurs
through past ages, bending, building
We build ours to-day.

The duties and the grandeurs of the past have their sure place in the literature of the present; but they have it on condition that the poet adopt towards them "a subjective and contemporary point of view appropriate to ourselves alone and to our new genius and environment, differing from anything hitherto", that he recognize that "such conception of current or gone-by life and art is for us the only means of their assimilation consistent with the

western world". Still the evocation of the past as the parent of the present will not be at the centre of the ideal poet's performance.

"The New World", Whitman insists, "needs the poems of realities and science, and of the democratic age and of basic equality". Emerson had not so clearly stated what the distinctive American poetry was to be. Whitman was able to surpass him partly because his experience of American life was ineffably broader, partly because he was himself a great poet, and in his formulations was simply reducing to the language of argument what he more habitually realized in the language of art. He is supremely the poet of realities, of the democratic average and of basic equality. In *By Blue Ontario's Shore* art and argument fuse:

These States are the amplest poem,
 Here is not merely a nation but a teeming Nation of nations,
 Here the doings of men correspond with the broadcast doings
 of the day and night.
 Here is what moves in magnificent masses, careless of
 particulars,
 Here are the roughs, beards, friendliness, combativeness
 the soul loves,
 Here the flowing trains, here the crowds, equality, diversity
 the soul loves.

In another important regard he enlarged upon Emerson both in doctrine and in performance. Emerson was essentially a lyrical being; and on the problems which did not touch him to the quick he has little of weight to say. In him the life of the emotions and the senses was curiously weak and limited. It was left to Whitman to apply the Emersonian principles to those forces of human life, and to become at once the exemplar and the inculcator of a warm liberal attitude to their expression. "From Maine to Florida and back again," said Matthew Arnold in 1869, "all America Hebraizes." Whitman sought to warm the Hebraism out of American criticism, and in so doing he powerfully aided the revision of the American character which became possible with the decline of New England. "He absorbed so much of the America about him", says Mr. Lewis Mumford, "that he is more than a single writer: he is almost a literature".

V

Up to now I have been concerned with the prophets of hope: it is now the turn of the prophets of despair. For the promise of American life, as described by Channing, Emerson, Lowell and Whitman, was not to be fulfilled. The poets and the prophets

retired into the remote background, and their places were taken by financial privateers and such shameless boodlers as hid behind the tunic of General Grant. The South was for long in impotence and humiliation: New England was in full decline: it was the heyday of New York finance, the era of the consolidation of the West and, later, of the rise of Chicago. The new age, usually described in American criticism as The Gilded Age, was indifferent and in large measure antipathetic to the values of art; as Henry James bitterly remarked, a young man must either go into business or go to the dogs. The finest critical minds declined to do either: they departed. "Carpets, pianos, window-curtains, brass bands, churches! How I hate them. Would I had been born savage. The curse of civilized cities is upon me", Lafcadio Hearn burst out,—and he departed for Japan. Recalling America with a more analytic mind, Henry James could discover:

No State in the European sense of the word, and indeed barely a specific national name. No sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentlemen, no palaces, no castles, nor manors, no old country-houses, nor parsonages, nor thatched cottages, nor wild ruins; no cathedrals, no abbeys, nor little Norman churches; no great universities, nor public schools—no Oxford, nor Eton nor Harrow; no literature, no novels, no museums, no pictures, no political society, no sporting class,—no Epsom, nor Ascot.

So wrote Henry James in 1879: he had just settled in England. It may be said that neither Henry James nor Lafcadio Hearn was truly American: the one did not reach America until he was almost twenty, the other passed a half of his first twenty years abroad. Far graver than their reproaches is that of Walt Whitman, troubled and depressed by the post-bellum America:

I say that our New World democracy... is, so far, an almost complete failure in its social aspects and in really grand religious, moral, literary and aesthetic results... the problem of the future of America is in certain aspects as dark as it is vast. Pride, competition, segregation, vicious wilfulness and license beyond example, brood already upon us. Unwieldy and immense, who shall hold in behemoth? who bridle leviathan? Flaunt it as we choose, athwart and over the roads of our progress loom huge uncertainty and dreadful thickening gloom.

The hopes of the most passionate among American democrats were in his later days often outweighed by his fears. He grew old in an age he condemned.

VI

"Henry James" said George Moore "went to France and read Turgenev. Howells stayed at home and read Henry James". And did so, one would add, to singularly little advantage. The son of an Ohio printer, he grew up in veneration of the New England masters, and his dearest wish was to transplant himself into the soil of New England and become a part of the Boston tradition. Howells was destined to superficial success: he became a Houghton Mifflin author, an editor of the *Atlantic*, an intimate of Lowell and Holmes, Norton and Child. Autodidact though he was, he had the refusal of the succession to Lowell in the Smith chair. Unfortunately the New England in which he scintillated was a far cry from the New England which a generation before had been a centre of the world's creative and critical literature. Unlike Emerson, Howells did not form, he merely voiced public opinion. He conformed: and in the Gilded Age it was even more dangerous to an artist that he should conform than that he should retire, like Whitman, or depart, like Henry James.

No man of good conscience has done more to vulgarize the national idea. Howells assures us that he believes with iron firmness in realism; and in the next breath he asserts that Jane Austen is—the words are incredible—"the first and last of the English novelists to treat material with entire truthfulness". And the book in which this remark occurs was published in the same year as *Tess of the D'Urbervilles!* What lies at the root of so perverse a conception of realism? A curious view of American life and character, which finds quotable expression in the notorious words: "the more smiling aspects of life are the more American". Howells seeks to vindicate this formula by insisting that in America the passions themselves have been modified and softened, sin, suffering and shame reduced, and that peculiarly American is the large, cheerful average of health, success and happy life. Realism in America must then be that art which stresses this large, cheerful average of health, success and happy life, and with Wordsworthian nervousness averts its ken from half of human fate. On the dialectical agility which enables Howells to apply a conception derived from a reading of American experience to so insular a writer as Jane Austen I shall not pause to comment. The America so loved and so chastened by the prophets has with Howells become no better than a Babbitt's dream of paradise. To such depths was criticism dragged by the forces working for conformity in The Gilded Age.

VII

Against such a tea-table conception of the range and spirit of literature, all that was cultivated and critical in the American mind revolted. Some rebels retreated in the wake of Henry James—Edith Wharton and James McNeill Whistler among the elders, Ezra Pound, Logan Pearsall Smith and T. S. Eliot among the younger. Others conspired with Joel Spingarn to erect an aesthetic stripped of all social relation. Most powerful of all the rebellions was that of the humanists led by Paul Elmer More and the late Irving Babbitt. The aim of humanism was a noble one; but from the outset the movement was doomed to sterility. It was a stroke of genius on someone's part to describe Babbitt as "a minor Brunetière". It is highly effective for a professor at the *École normale* to measure the literature of his age by the standard of Bossuet, Corneille and Molière: he is in so doing making an appeal to something central in the genius of France. "The rights of tradition" says Brunetière, "may be said to be the rights of the French mind itself, and in some sense to be the rights even of the very nation". For a Harvard or Princeton professor to appeal from the ways of his contemporaries, not to the standard of Emerson and Whitman or that of Franklin and Jefferson, but to that of Sophocles and Homer is to beat the empty air. Stuart Sherman has put it with superb vigour: "Babbitt erects his *chevaux-de-frise* of arbitrary definitions warranted to eviscerate every gizzard and break every neck born into this disastrous world since Aristotle; while More retreats into a blinding white mist of Platonism, where God Himself would think twice before pursuing." The sudden decline and eclipse of humanism is the fate assured to all who have no clear sense of the relativity and interconnection of things.

Taking a long view, one may say without paradox that the principal service of humanism to American culture was its provision for Stuart Sherman of a discipline in the literature of thought which rid him of most of his garish Stevensonian sensibility. Sherman laid to his heart the humanist lessons and then, through his association with the *Cambridge History of American Literature*, his immersion in the democratic atmosphere of the University of Illinois, and the intensification of his national awareness by the war, he turned to survey the national tradition, as Mr. Carl van Doren puts it, to discover "the tap-root of the national genius". He went in search of a national tradition in which humanism might be naturalized and so made a force in American culture: to his quarry he gave the name of "traditional emotion", to his

doctrine the name of "democratic humanism". His years under the eye of Professor Babbitt and Mr. More saved him for ever from the two dangers to which an uncritical adherent of the American tradition is exposed: the danger of setting too little value on style, manner and mood, and thus overestimating books which are merely dogged transcriptions of life, and the danger of being beguiled by books which hide beneath a narrow and shallow idealism a great vacuity. Neither the naturalist nor the sentimentalist could take Sherman in: and so he was free, without a relaxation of critical temper, to commit himself to the guidance of the national idea.

"American Literature", he says in an influential essay, "exhibits all the resources and powers of a national literature. It has acquired a history, it has developed critical tendencies, it has participated in successive movements, it has produced schools and has evolved styles, it has discovered wide ranges of new material, it has made significant innovations in form, it has even put forth dialectal branches from a sturdily vernacular stock". And yet Sherman complains: "Whatever taste and judgment in literary matters we attain are formed by English rather than American masters"; whereas "it is only by using our native literature and keeping it current, by making it saturate the national consciousness,—it is only so that we can make our lengthening history serve and enrich and inform us, and give to our culture the momentum of a vital tradition".

The tumult and the shouting in American criticism since the War has been about humanism and Marxism—the latter a doctrine at least as inapplicable and alien as the former; but the central movement has been that in which Sherman is the most vigorous if not the most learned figure,—the movement for the spiritual interpretation of the American past, and for the relation of the American present to the earlier phases of the national culture. All great literatures, as Sherman says, "tend to something at the centre like a thoroughbred strain". To discover what this "something at the centre" is, and to assume one's critical standards in the light of it, is the desire of the most effective critics of the past twenty years. Writing ten years ago, Mr. Carl van Doren declared that when in 1913 "he set out to become a specialist in American literature, he seemed to his friends to be cutting off his future with an ignorant, if not with a deliberate, knife, much as if he were some improvident youth, who had vowed against all advice to court Cinderella while she still huddled among her cinders". 1913 is the date of John Macy's *The Spirit of American Literature*.

Since that year, within the universities and without, critics have been occupied with exploring the national past and consolidating and clarifying the national sense of continuity and connection. "The historical sense", says Mr. Eliot, "is nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; the historical sense involves a perception not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence". The strengthening of the historical sense, especially of the awareness of an American tradition continuous, inescapable, and yet singularly hospitable to originality, is the chief service contemporary criticism has performed, the most vital service rendered to the national idea since the appearance of *Leaves of Grass*.