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The Archives of Eden

BY GEORGE STEINER

“The Lord has brought us hither through the swelling seas, through perills of Pyrats, tempests, leakes, fyres, Rocks, sands, diseases, starvings: and has here preserved us these many yeares from the displeasure of Princes, the envy and Rage of Prelats, the malignant Plotts of Jesuits, the mutinous contentions of discontented persons, the open and secret Attempts of Barbarous Indians, the seditious and undermining practises of heretical false brethren.” Thus John Winthrop in 1643. This ‘bringing hither’, this Great Migration, in Puritan parlance, was no common fact of history. Thomas Hooker, back in England, had speculated whether the establishment of the New England polity was not a signal of the end of secular time, for this was the *ne plus ultra* of mundane innovation. Any ulterior discovery and instauration would exceed terrestrial possibilities and herald the beginning of the reign of everlastingness as foretold in Revelation. But the ambiguities in the trope of final renovation, in the theology and sociology of the Edenic, were formidable from the outset.

If New England was the enactment of a fresh Covenant of Grace (Cotton Mather’s constant term), if the members of this Covenant benefited from the greatest opportunity of salvation granted to any people since the birth of Christ, were they, in some real sense, ‘new men’, analogues to Adam? Vexatious, almost socially destructive, controversies over the need and quality of baptism in the new world, over the operative transfer of original sin in the new community and individual, bear witness to the literal, yet opaque, character of the Adamic model. And if the newfound lands of the Covenant of Grace were indeed, as Peter Bulkeley had proclaimed, “as a City set upon an hill, in the open view of all the earth . . . because we profess ourselves to be a people in Covenant of God,” and the *only* such people to be found on a lapsed planet — what then of the ‘mutinous contentions’ and the ‘heretical false brethren’ cited by Winthrop? What then of the ‘barbarous Indians’ and the plagues of drought and sickness visited upon the new Jerusalem?

No less ambiguous was the question of the relations to the old world. Perry Miller summarizes one main current of thought (*The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century*, p. 470): the Puritans “did not, at least in the first settlements, regard themselves as fleeing from Europe but as participating to the full in the great issues of European life; they did not set out to become provincial communities on the edge of civilization but to execute a flanking manoeuvre in the all-engrossing struggle of the civilized world.” But a more radical current of severance was also at work. By the 1630s, it was manifest that neither Geneva, nor Amsterdam, nor Edinburgh had been able to bring to ailing Christendom the light of enduring rebirth and true Congregation. Soon prelacy and worse would reassert themselves in the English realm. Episcopacy and Popery were the universal portents of a nearing apocalypse. The new Israel must leave behind the places and legacy of damnation. Thus New England was not only the precise analogue to the Promised Land, but the Noah’s ark in a period of deluge. To look back would be suicidal. This doctrine of divorcement could, moreover, justify the problematic harshness of the western Eden: had the children of Abraham not had to dwell in the desert and suffer affliction and attack on their journey? The collision between these two currents or, more accurately, the intricate hybrids and compromises between them, made the problem of cultural heritage acute. In one sense, the intellectual baggage brought by the Puritans, the language and the logic of all articulate awareness, were those of post-Renaissance Europe, with their evident foundations in pagan classicism and Christian humanism. How could it have been otherwise? Yet in another sense, this legacy carried with it the very seeds of error and corruption, the histories of scission and heresy, which had edged man towards ruin. If the Great Migration was to escape from the blackness of Goshen and take possession of the New Canaan, it could only do so in the (literal) light of a newborn knowledge, of an innocence of intellect and sensibility. Adam’s pre-lapsarian wisdom gave warrant for such a concept of knowledge purged of knowingness, of perfect *natural* wisdom.

All these antinomies, and the spectrum of intermediate positions between them, turn on the primary trope of ‘felt time’, of the chronological. Was America ‘young’ or ‘old’? Was America the *mundus novus* promised by St. John and proclaimed by Spanish ecclesiastical chroniclers almost immediately after Columbus’s journey? Was it an authentic vestige of the Garden set aside for the re-entry of the new Adam? In which case, it had no ‘history’. Or was

it, on the contrary, an ancient world, no more intemporal and immune from the inheritance of the Fall than were the lands from which the Pilgrims came? And what of these new Israelites themselves? Some held the Covenant of Grace to be, concretely as it were, regenerative. In the new world man was made new, the vestments of his fallen state stripped from him. Others were less sanguine. Even if this was, or was to be, 'earth's other Eden', it was the Old Adam who had come to it 'through the swelling seas'. Inevitably, he carried with him the contagion of history.

The options, the conflicts of vision implicit in these contrasting suppositions, extend to the whole fabric of American sensibility. They have largely determined the course of American religious and political development, the politics and sociology of American self-definition, the psychological diversities in American public and private conduct. In essence, pragmatic agencies prevailed. The 'City set upon a hill' did not found a new language. It spoke its message of renovation in European tongues and via the logic of Aristotle, of Ramus and, after the 1670s, in that of Descartes. Unlike the Jacobin utopians of September 1792, the men of the new world did not begin a new calendar, a Year One of messianic inception: Yet impulses towards apocalyptic novelty continued to press on the fabric of American institutions and challenges. Utopian communities and movements were a recurrent phenomenon. The Mormons moved on in search of the new and the real Zion. Indeed, the mechanism of the Adamic is one of the fundamental aspects of American history: in the face of political-social atrophy or corruption, the claims of the ideal, of the Covenant of Grace, seen now as a non- or post-theological contract with history, are reaffirmed. Time and again, American consciousness would turn its back on the blighted past; the restlessness of hope points west. The conflict is unresolved. From it springs much of the creative wealth of the American temper. From it, as well, spring essential uncertainties and frustrations in respect of 'culture', of the life of the mind in society as this life has, *mutatis mutandis*, been construed and experienced in the 'old west' since Hellenistic times.

To consider these uncertainties, simply to view them as potentially negative, is to choose, almost unawares, between the two polarities of 'young' and 'old', of the Adamic and the historical. It is to set aside, even if only provisionally and in the service of a working hypothesis, the claim that it is far too soon to attempt any balance-sheet of the American intellectual or artistic achievement. It is to dissent from the

belief that we are, substantively, dealing with a 'young culture' some three brief centuries old and that any judgment of its harvest of thought and of its literacies in the perspective of more ancient models is futile and unfair. One's choice in regard to these alternatives is, finally, a matter of instinct, a deep-seated hunch. *It may well be erroneous*; it may well be of a kind which future events or a re-ordering of the intractably manifold evidence will refute. But whoever engages — and this mere engagement may be fatuous — concepts as inchoate, as recalcitrant to agreed definition and transcription, as 'culture', as 'spiritual values', will have to start from instinct, from persuaded arbitrariness if he is to proceed at all.

I take it that American culture has no extraterritoriality to time; that it is not a 'young' culture in any but the most banal and localized sense (i.e. that the institutions in, through which this culture is expressed and disseminated were founded at a later date than their European counterparts and in a physically undeveloped or underdeveloped setting). I am positing that the great conceit of the Edenic, of the American Adam, whatever its manifest theological-political force, whatever its continued translation into later radical and messianic theories and practices of society, is not culturally determinative. The begetters and first organizers of American cultural affairs, in education, in the arts, in the pure and applied sciences, were Europeans whose equipment, whose modes of understanding and argument, were as 'old' as those of the neighbours they left behind. I am assuming that none of the great American re-negotiations of the contract between society and history — be it in the promise of happiness in the Bill of Rights, in the *catharsis* of Jacksonian populism, be it in Woodrow Wilson's New Freedom or Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal — differs, ontologically, from similar renovations in European social history and that none constitutes a *novum* in the sense attached by the Puritans to the covenant with Abraham or the instauration of Mosaic Law. In short: the Puritan programme of a break with the 'corrupt ancientness' and hereditary taint of European history, the great hunger of successive waves of immigrants for a new dispensation free of the terrors and injustice which had marked their communal past, have played a central role in the American imagination and in the rhetoric of American identity. But they do not afford the actual products of American culture a calendar of Arcadian youth, a time of special grace. On the contrary. American culture has stood, from its outset, on giant shoulders. Behind Puritan style lay the sinew of English Tudor, Elizabethan and

Jacobean prose. Behind the foundation of American universities lay the experience of Oxford and Cambridge, Aristotelian logic and the mathematics of Galileo and Newton. British empiricism and the world of the *philosophes* underwrite the Jeffersonian vision of an American enlightenment. Goethe stands behind Emerson as Shakespeare and Milton do behind Melville. It may be, as D.H. Lawrence found, that American culture is 'very old' precisely because it has been heir to so much. The New England divines would concur. By the early eighteenth century, William Cooper testified to "God's withdrawal" from a new world whose conditions of spirit and civil practise were no better than in the old. The idiom of his testimony was that of Jeremiah and the Cataline orations, of Juvenal and the Aesopian satirists of the European reformation.

If 'American culture', so far as any meaning worth disagreeing about can be attached to so general a notion, is not *sui generis*, if it is a branch of the classical-Christian aggregate of European civilization, it may be legitimate to ask what its relations to Europe are and where the present centres of gravity lie.

Methodologically, such questions are indefensible. 'American culture(s)' is a pluralistic concept whose diverse components are themselves very nearly as diffuse as their aggregate. No individual can provide anything but the most intuitively vague, partial account of any one aspect of American intellectual-artistic-scientific activity. The notion that one can say anything responsible about the whole construct is patently absurd. There have been histories and analytic deliniations of 'the American mind' at one or another period and attempts at a summarizing profile. Invariably, these have fallen short of the complex and amorphous data. At the very best, one will generalize and drop names in an impressionistic register of guesswork and prejudice. This is exactly what I shall do: to generalize, to drop names. But what other method is there? How else does any critique or inventory of values proceed? The necessary scruple is that of self-irony, of the hope that one's 'indefensible' asking will elicit not so much F.R. Leavis's famous response 'Yes, but' as it will that even more fertile instigation to understanding, 'No, but'.

American philosophy has been thin stuff. There have been psychologists of undoubted penetration and stylishness, notably William James. There is, certainly since the 1940s, a distinguished school of analytic logic (from Quine, say, to Kripke). American jurisprudence and theory of contract, in the social and ethical sense, has made useful contributions to the general current of western

liberal thought. But it is doubtful whether there has been on native ground a major philosophic presence with the possible exception — the work is still, in large measure, unavailable — of C.S. Peirce. And even in this fascinating instance, it is difficult to make out a metaphysics, an attempt at a philosophic discourse from the centre. But it is metaphysics and a central discourse on values which constitute the quality of western philosophy from the Pre-Socratics to the present. It is the endeavour of successive philosophers and schools of reflection, from the Ionian to the existentialist, to ‘think being’ as a manifold totality and to extend this ontological act to every principal category of human behaviour, which has largely informed the inward history of man and society in the west. Such ontological centrality and continuity has been either derivative in or, indeed, absent from the climate of American feeling. There are, therefore, regards in which the tenor of American feeling is closer to the bias for magic, for pragmatic *bricolage*, current in non-western traditions than it is to the world of Plato and of Kant (one can invoke the singular here because the unitary fabric of western metaphysics has been so striking). The twentieth century offers graphic evidence: there is, quite simply, no American metaphysician, no ‘thinker on being’, no enquirer into the meaning of meaning to set beside Heidegger or Wittgenstein or Sartre. There is no phenomenology of American provenance comparable to that of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. No philosophic theology of the order of radical challenge proposed by Bultmann or by Barth. The inheritance of ontological astonishment (*thaumazein*) and systematic response remains unbroken from Heraclitus to Sartre’s *Les Mots*. It runs through Aquinas, Descartes, Hume, Kant, Hegel and Nietzsche. There is no American membership in that list. And what I am trying to spell out is not a technical consideration: it is a constant in Hellenic and European existence. The major philosopher is one whose discourse, as it were, successive generations carry on their person. Platonism, Cartesianism, the idealism and moral imperatives of Kant, the historicism of Hegel and Marx, existentialism after Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, have been ways of life, landscapes of private and public motion, for countless men and women entirely innocent of any formal philosophic schooling or specialized interest. Philosophic debate, between Platonists and Aristotelians, between Thomists and Cartesians, between logical positivists and Heideggerians or Sartrians or Bergsonian vitalists, are emphatic elements of political and generational identity. Just now, a fair number of my students carry Gramsci’s prison-texts in their left

pocket. A fair number carry the prison-writings of Bonhoeffer in their right (the two books being dialectically cognate). The best will carry both. It is 'the book in the pocket' which matters, the espousal of a text as radical and pivotal to private impulse and social stance. It is the Socratic conviction that a community of rational men is one pervaded by explicit philosophic argument and that abstract thought is the true motor of felt life. This conviction is, on the American scene, 'academic' in a sense which I hope to make usefully arguable.

Roger Sessions, Elliott Carter are composers of undoubted stature. Charles Ives is a most intriguing 'original'. Up to this point in its history, however, American music has been of an essentially provincial character. The great symphony of 'the new world' is by Dvorak. It is Varese's *Amériques* which comes nearest to a musical transposition of its spacious subject. Again, limiting oneself to the twentieth century — a limitation inherently weighted in America's favour — it is obvious that there are in American music no names to set beside those of Stravinsky, of Schoenberg, of Bartók, of Alban Berg and Anton von Webern, that the *oeuvre* of a Prokofiev, of a Shostakovich, perhaps even of a Benjamin Britten represents an executive 'density' and imaginative continuity strikingly absent from the work of American composers. And even if the Stockhausen-Boulez era is now passing, its role, its formal and substantive logic in the history of western music, are on a level which, until now, American composers have rarely challenged, let alone matched.

It is, at this point, incumbent on the brief to say something of the development of mathematics in the new world. For me to do so is merely to dramatize incompetence. Anyone with even the most amateurish interest in the field will be able to cite a score of American names close to or at the top of the pyramid. There have been in this century, there continue to be, classic American achievements in every branch of analysis, of algebraic topology, of group theory, of measure theory and stochastics, of number theory. Yet, looked at closely, the roster shows that much of the pre-eminent work has been done *in* America by mathematicians and mathematical thinkers of a foreign origin and schooling (Gödel, von Neumann, Weyl, Bochner, Milner, etc.). And although it is absurd for a layman even to conjecture along these arcane lines, it looks as if much of the fundamental progress, notably in topology and number theory, this is to say in the high reaches of pure rather than applied mathematics, is being made in France, in Russia, in the British school of mathematics, to be taken up thereafter on American ground. (This, at least, is the impression of

one who has been a mute witness to the proceedings and recruitment of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton.)

The triad metaphysics-music-(pure)mathematics is, of course, purposed. It crystallizes, since Pythagoras and Plato, the singular bent of western sensibility towards abstraction, towards the wholly disinterested, non-utilitarian, non-productive (in any literal sense) play of the mind. It crystallizes the singular western obsession with the creation of sensory “monuments of unaging intellect.” The pursuit, even at the risk of personal existence or of the survival of the *polis*, of speculative thought; the invention and development of melody, *mystère suprême des sciences de l’homme* (Lévi-Strauss); the proposal and proof of theorems in pure mathematics — these define, quintessentially, the cancer of the transcendent in western man. It is they, it is the place which education and society afford them, which make of western spiritual history a legacy of Greece. It is they which, in short-hand, allow, indeed compel a working definition of the concept of a ‘high culture’. Why it should be that Thales of Miletus was so absorbed in the predictive calculation of an eclipse that he fell down a well or that Archimedes should, in his garden at Syracuse, have chosen to continue his work on conic sections rather than flee for his life from invading enemies — these remain enigmas of genetics, of climatic and economic environment, of pathological good luck which historians and sociologists of science continue to debate. But the fact is plain enough: the hunter’s cry when an abstract verity is cornered, the commitment of personal life to perfectly ‘useless’ metaphysical or mathematical concerns, the range and formal complexity of music in the west, have their specific source in the Greek ‘mental set’, have been the basis for our theory and practise of excellence. Personally, I would go further. The evolution of the species has given little ground for comfort. We are, on the whole, a cowardly, murderous bundle of appetites endowed with seemingly limitless instincts of destruction and self-destruction. We are the wasters of the planet and the builders of the death-camps. Ninety-nine percent of humanity conducts lives either of severe deprivation — physical, emotional, cerebral — or contributes nothing to the sum of insight, of beauty, of moral trial in our civil condition. It is a Socrates, a Mozart, a Gauss or a Galileo who, in some degree, compensate for man. It is they who, on fragile occasion, redeem the murderous, imbecile mess which we dignify with the name of history. To be in some touch, however modest, with the motions of spirit and soul in metaphysics and the abstract sciences, to apprehend, however

indistinctly, what is meant by the 'music in' and 'of thought', is to attempt some collaboration in the tortuous, always threatened, progress of the human animal (biological progress being on a time-scale which escapes both our understanding and significant intervention). To grasp, to be able to transmit to others some modest paraphrase of the beauty in a Fermat equation or a Bach canon, to hear the hunter's halloo after truth as Plato heard it, is to give life some excuse. This is, I repeat, my own absolute conviction. As such, it is without any general interest. But the fact that such a conviction will strike the vast majority of *educated* Americans as effete or even (politically, socially) dangerous nonsense, may not be without relevance. As may not be irrelevant to the heart of our subject — the state of 'American culture', the relations of this culture to Europe — the fact that American philosophy and music remain of a distinctly secondary order and that much of what is stellar in American mathematics is of a foreign source. Aquinas, Spinoza, Kant have their statues in European cities; my own childhood transpired between the Rue Descartes and the Rue Auguste Comte, between a square dedicated to Pascal and a statue of Diderot. The most voluptuous of central European chocolates is named after Mozart, the most seductive of steak-dishes after Chateaubriand and Rossini. Such *kitsch* pays tribute to a formidable recognition. Why are American streets so silent to the remembrance of thought?

Argument by head-count is tedious. All one wants to indicate are some rubrics for discussion by more competent critics and historians. American painting has been explicitly imitative of European conventions and models until the close of what is now called 'post-Impressionism'. American abstract expressionism, action painting, the parodistic genres of Jasper Johns, of Warhol, of Lichtenstein, the work of de Kooning and of Rothko, point to a veritable explosion of talent and influence. It was plausible to argue, from the mid 1950s to ca. 1975, that the mastering energies in painting and the graphic arts had emigrated from Paris or London to New York. This is no longer the case. It now looks as if much of American art after the second world-war pressed to a conclusion *in extremis* instigations, formal suggestions, contradictions inherent and articulate in the great currents of Russian and west-European abstraction, constructivism, collage, and so on. For all its wit and incandescence, the American scene was one of the epilogues to modernism. This impression may well be myopic. What does seem dubious is that any modern American painter will emerge as

possessing a stature, an innovative or recreative strength comparable to that of Marcel Duchamp (perhaps *the* artist-programmer of our century), Braque, Kandinsky and Picasso. It could well be that in the fine and applied arts there are only two fields in which the American performance, to this date, gives unambiguous evidence of innovative genius. These would be architecture, with its obvious links with technology and engineering, and modern dance. It is when a Balanchine or Cunningham ballet is being danced, or when the eye seeks to take in the tower-frieze of lower Park Avenue or Pei's addition to the National Gallery in Washington, that the sense of America's 'making it new' is unquestionable. But again, on a continental scale, in terms of a history which has behind it the classical and the European past, this is not an overwhelming harvest.

It is in no Adamic or Pentecostal tongue, such as the Puritans lovingly pondered, that American writers write: it is in English. This banality may well render intractable, if not spurious, the question of 'the Americanness' of American literature. Strictly regarded, American English and the literature it produces is one of the branches, if statistically the most forceful, of the prodigal ramifications of the mother-tongue. Like the language and literature of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, of the Anglo-Indian community, of the West Indies or of the English-speaking nations of Africa, American speech defines itself in interactive terms of dynamic autonomy and of dependence upon the eroded but still canonic primacy of the motherland. In this planetary perspective, American literature is at once dialectal and regional in respect of the source-centre, a formal and structural relation unaltered by the fact that the 'American dialect' is now more and more dominant throughout the English-speaking and, what matters even more, the English-learning world. This 'continentally regional' literature is itself composed of regional elements in the more natural sense of the word. Indeed, the strengths of American literature have, characteristically, revealed themselves in regional clusters and local constellations. The Hawthorne-Melville-Emerson-James grouping in New England, the regionalism of Faulkner, the urban-Jewish and even Yiddish aggregate of Bellow-Mailer-Malamud-Roth-Heller are obvious cases in point. A wary gregariousness, even in expatriation, has marked American literary talent. If the history of American drama has been, in the main, provincial (consider the parochial rhetoric, the crankiness of O'Neill's late plays which, in many respects, represent the decisive achievement in American play-

writing), that of American poetry and, pre-eminently, of the American prose novel, has been exhilarating. The decades after the second world war witnessed a general western turn towards the examples and authority of the American novel (*c'est l'heure de roman américain*, proclaimed French critics who had been among the first to spot the seminal role of Dos Passos, Hemingway and Faulkner). The summits are *not* American: they are Thomas Mann, Kafka, Joyce and Proust. But the general terrain of the novel in the mid-twentieth century has been widely governed and, at vital points, redrawn by American novelists and masters of the short story. The contrast with the palsied state of fiction in England after D.H. Lawrence is drastic. The state of American poetry solicits more tentative, qualified placement. Here the landscape is strewn with critical hyperbole and modishness. How much is there of continuing life in Frost? To what degree will the presence of Wallace Stevens depend on astringent anthologizing? How brief was the period of Robert Lowell's shaping trust in his own considerable but fitful powers? These are unstable areas. One is bound to get magnitudes and relations wrong. The self-evident point is this: in distinction from American philosophy or music, American literature has claims to classic occasion. The 'deep-breathing' necessities of executive form and voice which it manifests (to adapt a phrase from Henry James) are indisputable. The question I want to come back to is a different one: what are the relations between literature and society on American ground (for it is these relations which enter crucially into the notion of 'culture')? How much does American poetry and fiction, even or particularly when it is of major seriousness, matter in America?

If these cursory questions have been worth putting, if there is anything but ignorance or short-sightedness to the observations from which they derive (a likelihood of which I am acutely aware), a paradox should spring to view.

As he takes notice of and part in American daily life, even the most jaundiced of observers will be literally overwhelmed by the scope, generosity, technical brilliance and public prestige of the American cultural enterprise. Museums dot the land. There is scarcely a town or city, however isolated, which does not boast its art gallery, its academy and collection of painting and sculpture. For the American these are no mausolea. No country, with the exception of the Soviet Union, can match the civic, didactic energies and imaginative largesse of the American museum-world. Via lectures, mobile exhibitions, workshops, the dissemination of its holdings through reproductions, the

American museum has made of itself a teaching-instrument and focus of sensibility in the community. Financially, but also at the level of communal pride and enjoyment it has, beyond almost all other comparable institutions in other societies, involved ordinary men and women in its activities. It is in modern America that Schiller's dream of political-moral education through aesthetic experience would seem to make sense. The situation in music is parallel. No nation on earth boasts more numerous orchestras or more orchestras of the first rank (Chicago, Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Minneapolis, San Francisco, to cite only a few). Chamber music, solo recitals, academies of music, music-schools and festivals, the broadcast of music, are present in American life on a scale and at a pitch of quality which other societies (again with certain special exceptions which I will refer to) can only envy. That most labile and magical of genres, grand opera, flourishes. It is not only to New York, but to Santa Fe, to Bloomington, Indiana, and now to Norfolk, Virginia, that one will go to see and hear some of the finest opera performances in modern times. The long-playing record industry, the availability of tapes and tape-recorders to the music-lover of modest means — an availability more highly developed, more imaginatively marketed in America than it is anywhere else — has made the history of music, from the Gregorian chant to the electronic synthesizer, a dimension of the middle-class home. American ballet leads the world. Where on earth are there more or better libraries, libraries which have shown more public spirit in involving the community in their resources and activities? Extend this involvement to the college and university campuses and you will have, both in statistical terms and in regard to access and use, a 'book-world' like no other. Can it be an accident that the American paper-back has altered the gamut of literacy in the west, from the most esoteric domain to that of mass-consumption as no other modern typographic invention has done?

And what of the colleges and universities themselves, of a structure of higher education whose units run into the thousands (a fantastic figure, yet one Americans take for granted)? At this point, comparisons with other countries all but break down. No society has ever declared and fulfilled a comparable commitment to advanced schooling in the liberal arts, in the social and natural sciences, in technology and the performing arts. No other society has ever opened the doors of the academy to almost anyone desiring entrance. And though the relations between the 'academic' and the 'cultural' are undoubtedly complex and even at various moments polemic, the

plain fact remains: millions of young and not-so-young Americans (consider night-schools, centres of continuing education, community colleges of every kind) are engaged in the systematic study of the arts and the sciences on a time-scale, in a context of public fiscal support, with access to libraries and laboratories, studios and planetaria, picture-galleries and concert-halls, undreamt-of in history. In short: Americans are engaged, like no other society, in a general pursuit of intellectual and artistic attainment in establishments of tertiary education. Nor does any other society rival the continuity of impulse which reaches out from these establishments into the life of the adult. The alumnus, with his financial, but also intellectual and heuristic stake in the forward-life of the college or university which he has attended, is a singularly American phenomenon. It has been said that Oxford and Cambridge colleges own land whereas American colleges own loyalties. In recent years, in midst of a recession, such institutions as Stanford and Princeton have raised capital from their alumni on a scale which equals the entire budget for higher education in a number of European countries.

Given the institutional eminence and diversity, given the economics of American cultural enterprise — the museums and the symphony halls, the natural history emporia and the pillared ‘Athenaeums’, the colleges and the universities (is there now a Californian community without one or both?) — can one honestly query the dynamism, the future hopes of the American ‘motion of spirit’ (*motu spirituale* is Dante’s perfectly concrete but resistant tag)? Seen from the gray and enervation of the European condition, is American culture not precisely what Puritan theodicy and Jeffersonian meliorism saw it to be: a ‘City upon a hill’, a second wind for the spent runner? The answer is, I think, ‘Yes’, but it is ‘Yes’ in a peculiarly paradoxical, even retrograde sense.

The vital clue lies, of course, with that prodigality of conservation and re-transmission to which I have pointed. American museums and art collections are brimfull of classical and European art. European and antique edifices have been brought to the new world stone by literal stone or mimed to the inch. American appetites for the treasures and bric-a-brac of the medieval, the Renaissance or the eighteenth-century past remain devouring. Scarcely a day passes without the translation westward of some further artefact of European glory. American orchestras, chamber groups, opera companies, perform European music. The resistance to new American compositions on the part of impresarios, conductors and, presumably, their

audiences, is notorious. As is the massive conservatism of the symphonic and operatic repertoire. More new or experimental operas are produced in the opera houses of provincial Germany in a year than in the Metropolitan in a decade. The commissioning and performance of new music by the BBC in Britain, by the Cologne and South-West German Rundfunk broadcasting networks, by the research-centres for music at Beaubourg or in Milan, have no real parallel in the Victoriana of the American operatic-orchestral and classical-music establishment. New York has yet to hear Schoenberg's greatest opera, and when this 'revolutionary' event will take place, it will, naturally, have a European cause and substance. American libraries are the manifold Alexandria of western civilization. In them are to be found the accumulated treasures and trivia of the European millennia, the Shakespeare folios and the ephemera of a hundred languages. Communities with no tolerable bookstore — Bloomington, Indiana, Austin, Texas, Palo Alto, California — enshrine the incomparable archives of the literatures of Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries or the documents, periodicals, personal memoirs, graphic memorabilia of whole decades of European thought and calamity. It is to Widener Library that Soviet scholars must travel in search of the pre-October and Leninist past; it is to Rice University in Texas that English bookmen must journey if they wish to explore in depth the Brontës and their background; it is to the Folger in Washington, to the Huntington in Pasadena that the Shakespeare-editor proceeds for his collations. If Europe was to be laid waste again, if the wolves, as a chronicler of the Thirty Years' War put it, were to take lodging in its cities, very nearly the sum total of its literatures, of its historical archives, together with a major and representative portion of its art, would survive in America's safe-keeping. It was as if the American Adam, on re-entering the Garden, had brought with him the enormous lumber of his passage through history.

This, then, is my surmise: the dominant apparatus of American high culture *is that of custody*. The institutions of learning and of the arts constitute the great archive, inventory, catalogue, store-house, rummage-room of western civilization. American curators purchase, restore, exhibit the arts of Europe. American editors and bibliographers annotate, emend, collate, the European classics and the moderns. American musicians perform, often incomparably, the music which has poured out of Europe from Guillaume de Machaut to Mahler and Stravinsky. Together, curators, restorers, librarians, thesis-writers, performing artists in America underwrite, reinsure the

imperilled products of the ancient Mediterranean and the European spirit. America is on a scale of unprecedented energy and munificence, the Alexandria, the Byzantium of the 'middle kingdom' (that proud Chinese term) of thought and of art which is Europe, and which is Europe still. Again and again, the impetus of American modernism, most particularly in poetry, has been paradoxically antiquarian. T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, Robert Lowell in *History*, have laboured to re-assemble into comely order, to inventorize and anthologize by inspired quotation, the whole of the European past. These poet-critics are erudite tourists racing through the museum galleries and libraries of Europe on a mission of inventory and rescue before closing time. And if the *American Poetry Review* is anything to go by, the change since Lowell is only this: it is not the British Museum, the Uffizzi or the Louvre which is seminal today, but the National Museum of Amerindian Art and Archaeology in Mexico. Thus it is that American museums stage sovereign shows of Picasso or of Henry Moore, but that American painting and sculpture do not generate canvases or statues which would make for a comparable *oeuvre*; that American orchestras play Schoenberg and Bartók rather than American composers whom, reasonably I think, they deem of distinctly lesser stature; that American philosophers edit, translate, comment upon and teach Heidegger, Wittgenstein or Sartre but do not put forth a major metaphysics; that the pressure of presence throughout the world of the mind and of moral feeling exercised on civilization by a Marx, a Freud, even a Lévi-Strauss, is of a calibre which American culture does not produce. That this disparity continues in a century in which America has achieved unprecedented economic prosperity while Europe has twice lurched to the brink of suicide, seems to me to point to fundamental differences in value-structure (some of which I will touch on briefly). If these differences are indeed fundamental, and if we are looking not at a 'young' culture yet to find its own life-forces but an 'old' and a 'museum-culture', then it may follow that, in some cardinal domains at least, America will not produce first rate contributions.

This is both a desolate and impudent supposition. One must, of course, resist it. It does, however, press on me in what is one of the high places in the American pantheon: the Coolidge room in the Library of Congress. Here hang the finest Stradivarius violins, violas, cellos on earth. They hang lustrous, each millimeter restored, analysed, recorded. They hang safe from the vandalism of the Red Brigades, from the avarice or cynical indifference of dying Cremona.

Once a year, unless I am mistaken, they are taken from their cases and lent for performance to an eminent quartet. Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Bartók fill the room. Then back to their sanctuary of silent preservation. Americans come to gaze at them in pride; Europeans in awed envy or gratitude. The instruments are made immortal. And stone dead.

Suppose these hunches or provocations to be worth disagreeing with. How, then, is one to 'think the contradiction'? On the one hand, there is America, 'the morning star of the spirit', as Blake saw it. On the other, in the words of that influential poet from St. Louis and the Maine coast, a culture principally engaged in 'shoring up (European) fragments to set against its ruin'. What dialectic will relate the frontier and the archive, the Adamic and the antiquarian?

Cogent answers go back at least as far as de Tocqueville. But the libertarian cant which now inflects political and social discourse in the United States does not make it easy to touch frankly on their demographic components. Like the trope of the new Eden, that of the 'pioneer' comports an unexamined force of vitalism. Implicit in it is the presumption of élan, of a westward ho of men and women resolute, equipped to brave the fearful perils of the voyage and of the wilderness in order to build the new Jerusalem. There *were* such men and women, beyond doubt. There were pilgrims and frontiersmen who would, had they remained in 'the old country', have risen to the top. But the great mass of emigrants were not pioneers; they were fugitives, they were the hounded and defeated of Russian and of European history. If there is any common denominator to their manifold flight, it is precisely this: the determination to opt out of history in its classical and European vein, to abdicate from the historicity of injustice, of suffering, of material and psychological deprivation. It is in this regard that the recurrent analogy between Zionism, as it reaches back into the claustrophobic fantasies of the ghetto, and the 'Zionism' of the Puritan or the Mormon, is wholly deceptive. The return to Israel is a willed re-entry into tragic history. The march to New Canaan or Mount Sion in Utah is a negation of history. In this sense, it may well be that the ethnic-demographic elements in the successive waves of American settlement are 'Darwinian negative', that they embody the brilliant survival of an

anti-historical species, where 'anti-historicism' would entail an abdication from those adaptive mechanisms of tragic intellectuality, of ideological 'caring' (Kierkegaard's, Heidegger's word *Sorge*) which are indispensable to cultural creation of the first rank. Those who abandoned the various infernos of social discrimination and tyrannical rule in Europe were not, perhaps, the bold and shaping spirits, but very ordinary human beings who could 'no longer take it'. Those who saw in the Russian, Balkan, Mediterranean and west European condition nothing but a dead end were, perhaps, not the great forward dreamers of 1789, 1848, 1870, or 1917, but the carriers of the gene of tired common sense. Send me "The wretched refuse of your teeming shore," urges the Statue of Liberty. Could it be that Europe did just that?

The counter-examples are so dramatic as to make the argument almost unassailable. The obvious exceptions to the intellectual, cultural norm of immigration are the Puritan in seventeenth-century New England and the Jewish refugee of the 1930s and 40s. Both represent an élite whose impact proved to be overwhelmingly greater than its numbers. The latter case has been studied in detail. It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that the explosive excellence of American pure and natural sciences (notably physics) between, say, 1938 and the 1970s is the direct consequence of Nazi and fascist persecution. This persecution brought to America what is almost undoubtedly the intellectually most gifted community since fifth-century Athens and Renaissance Florence, that of the post-ghetto middle-class Jews of Russia, Central Europe, Germany and Italy. It is the community of Einstein and of Fermi, of von Neumann and of Teller, of Gödel and of Bethe. American Nobel Prizes in the sciences have been its address-book. But this formidably selected immigration animated far more than the sciences. Intellectual and art-history, the classics, musicology, *Gestalt* psychology and social theory, jurisprudence and econometrics, as they flourish in American colleges, universities and research-institutes during and after world war two, are the immediate product of the Central European and Slavic *diaspora*. As is the *floreat* of art-galleries and of symphonic orchestras, of intellectual journalism and of quality publishing in that nerve-centre of the mid-century we call Manhattan. Think away the arrival of the Jewish *intelligentsia*, think away the genius of Leningrad-Prague-Budapest-Vienna and Frankfurt in American culture of the past decades, and what have you left? For the very concept of an *intelligentsia*, of an élite minority infected with the leprosy of abstract

thought, is radically alien to the essential American circumstance. Till the current recession bit hard, American institutions of higher learning, American orchestras and museums, publishers in search of senior editors or the *New Yorker* looking for critics, have been able to bid for European talent. Refugees, emigrants, guests by choice have continued to arrive, though in relatively small numbers. The Vietnam war and economic crisis have very nearly halted the 'brain-drain'. In numerous quarters, the cheerful undergrowths of mediocrity and of the provincial are already encroaching on the inspired clearings made in the 1940s and 50s. What if there is no further *diaspora* of excellence? The question is not hypothetical. Oppenheimer posed it starkly the last time I saw him. He had been, both at Los Alamos and at the Institute in Princeton, the shepherd of the prize European flock. Where, he asked, were the American successors to Bohr and von Neumann, to Szilard and to Fermi, to Panofsky and to Kantorowicz, to Auerbach and to Kelsen? The appointments Oppenheimer made at the end are eloquent: a Frenchman and an Englishman in pure mathematics, a somewhat younger member of the refugee galaxy in art history, an historian from London. Can such importation continue?

After de Tocqueville, the pertinent headings could be those argued by Veblen and Adorno. In the Puritan scheme, secular culture was ancillary to, instrumental towards the theological centre. Successive generations of immigrants and settlers might bring with them a cultural inheritance but had to establish *de novo* its institutional media. Such instauration was, necessarily, a by-product of more primary disciplines of survival and social-political consolidation. From the outset, the secular arts and sciences, the constructs of speculative thought and of the imaginary had, in America, an unavoidable strain of artifice, of willed implantation. To reverse Ezra Pound's famous phrase, it was the Muses' diadem itself which was "an adjunct". This, together with an instinct for palpable organisation which informs both the American political and industrial-technological performance, led to the development of culture as craft, as specialization. Adorno's mordant term is *Kulturproduktion*, the application to cultural values and embodiments of intense professionalism, of manufacturing practises and packaging. 'Culture', the arts, literature, can be set high, can be monumentalized. But the resultant phenomenology is immediately reflective of the division of labour, of the ideals of efficacy, crucial to the American ethos. It is a 'thing out there', to be brought into and maintained in being by specialists (the academic, the

curator, the impresario, the performing artist). Its interactions with the community at large are those of ostensible presentment, of contractual occasion rather than of anarchic and subversive pervasiveness. Perhaps the distinction can best be made this way: the main enactments of American cultural life are organised (superbly so) rather than organic. Inevitably also, this organisation will take on the prevailing cast of economic valuation. The cultural, in Veblen's idiom, becomes a part of the overall dynamics of conspicuous consumption. There is not only *Kulturproduktion*, but a competitive marketing of the achieved product. Almost before it enters into the disinterested, if always problematic, zone of art, the American aesthetic, intellectual, literary product is made artifact. The energies against solitude, against the mystery of neglect on which the deployment and subterranean daemon of education in great art seems to depend, are compelling. A *bourse* of unequalled hunger and competitive largesse waits daily for new issues. Its investment in the artist or thinker is, quite literally, a trading in 'futures'. Successful issues rise to dizzying heights of display and reward; bankruptcy is no less swift. Master-critics or brokers of the value-market have been known to 'make or break' playwrights, novelists, composers, painters. The media, the clients follow their markings. There is not, or only rarely, that private rebellion of judgment, that prodigality and incoherence of critical debate which, given much humbler and decentralized economic conditions, enables a play in London or Paris, a painter in Newcastle or Barcelona, a publishing house in Sheffield or Bari, not only to endure in the face of metropolitan repudiation, but to generate (to 'invent', as it were) its own public. The which 'invention' is a decisive element in the penetration of artistic, philosophic, literary 'issues' — allowing both the technical and the general sense of the word — into the ordinary, quotidian awareness of a society. These are not points which it is easy to put concisely and transparently. They implicate the deep layers of social history. They are made manifest, if at all, in tidal motions across centuries. But, nevertheless, it may be worth supposing that the twofold impetus of 'cultural production' and of 'conspicuous consumption', an impetus immediately related to the initial planning and technical apartness of the life of intellect in the new world, does provide some explanation for the *conservative exhibitionism* to which I have pointed. *Kulturproduktion* and investment in competitive display would, indeed, help to account for a culture of museums, academies, libraries, institutes of advanced study. The name of a recent

addendum to this list, Research Park in North Carolina, is compact with connotations of both the Adamic and the mummified.

The riposte is self-evident. The pervasive density, the organicism of high culture in Europe is or was, until very recently, illusory. Those freely involved were a small caste, a more or less mandarin élite which happened to possess the instruments of articulate political and pedagogic enforcement. If European streets and squares are studded with the monumental vestiges of art and intellect, if debates on abstruse points in political theory (Aron *contra* Sartre) or Byzantine issues in the theory of culture (Leavis *contra* Snow) are front-page and even television news, if one's lobster is called by the name of Robespierre's red and fatal month of Thermidor, if examination questions in European schools and universities are published and argued nationally — all this is simply because the bureaucratic shamans of high literacy have, for essentially strategic purposes, imposed their (often hypocritical) sublimity on a numbed, indifferent or basically recalcitrant lower class. If they have any substance whatever, the handicaps or dilemmas which I have suggested in reference to artistic reaction and philosophic thought of the first rank in America, are inseparable from the democratic ideals and populist proceedings of the new world.

Often invoked, this argument is intuitively satisfying. In fact, it demands careful handling. The Periclean vision of the essential worth of a society in terms of its intellectual, spiritual, artistic radiance, the Socratic-Platonic criterion of the philosophically-examined individual life and of a hierarchy of civic merit in which intellect stood supreme were, presumably, formulated and codified 'from above'. But collective accord in this vision, whether spontaneous or conventional, *is* an authentic feature in classical and European social history. What we can reconstruct of communal participation in medieval art and architecture, of the passionate outpouring of popular interest in the often competitive, agonistic achievements of Renaissance artists and men of learning, of the complex manifold of adherence which made possible the Elizabethan theatre audience, is not nostalgic fiction. Nor is the witness borne today by the thousands and ten thousands who come to look on the most demanding of modern arts at Beaubourg. In other words: the notion that artistic-intellectual creation is the crown of a city or of a nation, that 'immortality' is in the hands of the poet, the composer, the philosopher, the man or woman infected with transcendence and *le dur désir de durer* (a phrase coined, as it happens, by a marxist and 'populist' poet), is inwoven in the fabric of Hellenic,

of Russian, of European values, public styles and, above all, educational practises. I repeat: there may well be in this inweaving a large part of hierarchic imposition, and it may well be that acceptance by the mass of the population has been conventional or halfhearted. But this acceptance is made manifest, it is *taught*. The American commitment to an existential, to a declaredly open economic value-system is unprecedented. The adoption, on a continental scale, of an eschatology of monetary-material success represents a radical cut in regard to the Periclean-Florentine typology of social meaning. The central and categorical imperative that to make money is not only the customary and socially most useful way in which a man can spend his earthly life — an imperative for which there is, certainly, precedent in the European mercantile and pre-capitalist ethos — is one thing. The eloquent conviction that to make money is also the most *interesting* thing he can do, is quite another. And it is precisely this conviction which is singularly American (the only culture, correlatively, in which the beggar carries no aura of sanctity or prophecy). The consequences are, literally, incommensurable. The ascription of monetary worth defines and democratizes every aspect of professional status. The lower-paid — the teacher, the artist out of the limelight, the scholar — are the object of subtle courtesies of condescension not, or not primarily, because of their failure to earn well, but because this failure makes them less *interesting* to the body politic. They are more or less massively, more or less consciously patronized, because the ‘claims of the ideal’ (Ibsen’s expression) are, in the American grain, those of material progress and recompense. *Fortuna* is fortune. That there should be Halls of Fame for baseball-players but no complete editions of classic American authors; that an American university of accredited standing should, very recently, have dismissed thirty tenured teachers on grounds of utmost fiscal crisis while flying its football squads to Hawaii for a single game; that the athlete and the broker, the plumber and the pop-star, should earn far more than the pedagogue — these are facts of life for which we can cite parallels in other societies, even in Periclean Athens or the Florence of Galileo. What we cannot parallel is the American resolve to proclaim and to institutionalize the valuations which underlie such facts. It is the sovereign candour of American philistinism which numbs a European sensibility; it is the frank and sometimes sophisticated articulation of a fundamentally, of an ontologically *immanent* economy of human purpose. That just this ‘immanence’ and ravenous appetite for material reward is inherent in the vast majority

of the human species; that we are a poor beast compounded of banality and greed; that it is not the spiky fruits of the spirit but creature comforts we lunge for — all this looks more than likely. The current ‘Americanization’ of much of the globe, the modulation from the sacramental to the cargo-cult whether it be in the jungles of New Guinea or the hamburger-joints, laundromats and supermarkets of Europe, points to this conclusion. *It may be that America has quite simply been more truthful about human nature than any previous society. If this is so, it will have been the evasion of such truth, the imposition of arbitrary dreams and ideals from above, which has made possible the high places and moments of civilization.* Civilization will have endured after Pericles by virtue, to quote Ibsen again, of a ‘life-lie’. Russian or European power-relations and institutions have laboured to enforce this ‘lie’. America has exposed it or, pragmatically, passed it by. The difference is cardinal.

But let us assume that the ‘élite model’ is correct. Let us assume that the “touchstones” (Matthew Arnold) of human excellence in the arts, in the life of intellect, in the pure and exact sciences are, at any given time, the product of the very few — this, surely, is almost a tautology — and that the context of echo, of valuation and transmission which these products require in order to endure and to energize culture — what F. R. Leavis designated, in a somewhat deceptive phrase, as “the common pursuit” — is, in turn, in the custody of a minority. The evidence points, very nearly overwhelmingly, to just such an assumption. The number of men and women capable of painting a major canvas, of composing a lasting symphony, of postulating and proving a fundamental theorem, of presenting a metaphysical system or of writing a classic poem, is, even on the millennial scale, very restricted indeed. Again, the current ecumenism of liberal hopes (or bad conscience) makes it difficult to discuss the vital issue of the sources of high art and intellect. But that these sources are ‘genetic’, though, very possibly, in a sense subtler and more resistant to biological-social analysis than nineteenth-century positivism supposed, that they are, in some way, ‘prepared-for mutations’ within very special hereditary and environmental matrices, is eminently probable. One says: ‘and environmental’, because there can be no doubt that environmental factors *are* significant, notably in respect of inhibition, of the blockage of a latent vocation. But this significance can be, has often been, vastly overstated in the perspective of egalitarian myths and ideals. The curve of genius, even of high talent is, most likely, inelastic.

Environmental support might add to the distribution at this or that point; it might have filled one or another gap in the line. But there is no evidence whatever that the multiplication of piano lessons throughout the community will generate one additional Bach, Mozart or Wagner. It is at the absolutely indispensable but, of course, secondary level of understanding, executive performance and transmission that the argument becomes more elusive. Here it is plausible to contend that better schooling, a wider spectrum of leisure, a general elevation in the material condition of private and public life, do matter. It seems almost self-evident that the appreciation of serious art, literature or music, a more general awareness of philosophic debate and scientific discovery and a willingness to respond actively to the instigations of meaning and of beauty, can be markedly augmented or curtailed by the economic and social context. I would not quarrel with this truism; only sound a cautionary note. The effects of environmental amelioration on the prevailing level of aesthetic, philosophic, scientific literacy and 'response-threshold' seem to be slow, diffuse and, rigorously considered, marginal. It does look, and this is a somewhat perplexing phenomenon, as if the number of human beings capable of responding intelligently, with any genuine commitment of sensibility, to, say, a Mozart sonata, a Gauss theorem, a sonnet by Dante, a drawing by Ingres or a Kantian proposition and deductive chain, is, in any given time and community, very restricted. It is, obviously, much larger than that of the creators and begetters themselves. But it is not exponentially larger. And, what is even more puzzling, its increase by means of educational and environmental support, though material, is not exponential either. (Somewhere in this opaque area may lie the explanation for the often-noticed fact that great critics — and a great critic is nothing but a loving, clairvoyant parasite feeding on the life of art — are so rare.) In brief: no amount of democratization will multiply creative genius or the incidence of truly great thought. And although democratization, i.e. the extension of better education, of more leisure, of a more liberal space of personal existence, to a greater number will add to the 'supporting cast' in civilization, it will not add massively, let alone without limit.

So be it. A number of corollaries follow. To generalise the Periclean or Socratic formula, man's often undone, generally fractional advance from animality can be measured, if at all, in terms of his artistic, philosophic, scientific creations and conjectures. We are the creatures of the bingo hall and the concentration camp. But we are also the

species from which Plato and Mozart sprang (or broke loose). If man's condition, if man's bestial history has any meaning whatever it lies, quite simply, in trying to shift, however minutely, the two halves of the equation, in trying, as it were, to add an occasional factor to the 'Plato-Mozart' end. The first thing a coherent culture will do, therefore, is to maximalize the chances for the quantum leap, for the positive mutation which is genius. It will try to keep its educational-performative-social institutions open-ended, vulnerable to the anarchic shock of excellence. As I have emphasized, such open-endedness, such alertness to the sudden track of the supremely-charged particle in the cloud-chamber of society, will not, materially, increase the percentage of artistic, philosophic greatness. But it may do something towards lessening the inhibitions, the densities of obtuseness, which can stifle greatness or deflect it from its full course. A coherent culture will do a second and much more important thing. It will construe its public value-scale and its school-system, its distribution of prestige and of economic reward, so as to maximalize the 'resonant surface', the supporting context for the major work of the spirit. It will do its utmost to educate and establish a vital audience for the poet and composer, a community of critical echo for the metaphysician, an apparatus of responsible vulgarization for the scientist. In other words, an authentic culture is one in which there is an explicit pursuit of a literacy itself focused on the understanding, the enjoyment, the transmission forward, of the best that reasons and imagination have brought forth in the past and are producing now. An authentic culture is one which makes of this order of response a primary moral and political function. It makes 'response' 'responsibility', it makes echo 'answerable to' the high occasions of the mind. I have said that such pursuit, through education and improved environment, does not have a boundless yield. The number of true 'respondents' will remain fairly small. The conclusion — as Athens and the European *polis* after Athens have drawn it — seems ineluctable. A culture, in the precise sense of the word, is one in which the small number of effective receivers and transmitters of art and of intellect will be placed to greatest advantage, in which they will be given the means to extend what they can of their obsession with transcendence to the community at large. To divorce the springs of civilization from the concept of a minority is either self-deception or a barren lie.

Yet it is on this divorce that the theory and practise of American secondary education in the twentieth century are founded. Whereas

European meritocracy, open-ended at the base, sharply narrowed at the apex, seeks to select and recruit a minority capable of serving excellence, the American pyramid is, as it were, inverted. It would make excellence fully accessible to the vulgate. This desideratum is inherently antinomian. It labours to correct the oversight or snobbery of God, the failure of nature to disseminate generally and equitably among men the potential for response to the disinterested, the abstract, the transcendent. This correction can only be undertaken at the cultural end of the stick. One cannot, beyond a severely limited and superficial degree, inject sensibility and intellectual rigour into the mass of society. One can, instead, trivialize, water down, package mundanely, the cultural values and products towards which the common man is being directed. The specific result is the disaster of pseudo-literacy and pseudo-numeracy in the American high school and in much of what passes for so-called 'higher education'. The scale and reach of this disaster have become a commonplace of desperate or resigned commentary. The pre-digested trivia, the prolix and pompous didacticism, the sheer dishonesty of presentation which characterize the curriculum, the teaching, the administrative politics of daily life in the high-school, in the junior college, in the open-admission 'university' (how drastically America has devalued this proud term), constitute the fundamental scandal in American culture. A fair measure of what is taught, be it in mathematics, be it in history, be it in foreign languages, indeed with regard to native speech, is, in the words of the President of Johns Hopkins, "worse than nothing." It has produced what he calls "America's international illiteracy" or what Quentin Anderson entitles "the awful state of intellectual affairs in this country."

Does this 'awfulness' not run counter to the widespread and public support for the arts and music which I have referred to earlier? I think not. But the point is one that needs to be made accurately. In the American élite such support embodies authentic response and involvement. In the great mass of cultural fellow-travellers — they are a great mass precisely because of the pseudo-values instilled in them by a totally superficial and mendacious populist ideal of general education — this support signifies only passivity, 'conspicuous consumption', the treatment of the cultural as a unit of economic-social display. Here there is no "common pursuit" but, to reverse Leavis's phrase, a "common flight", an evasion from the political connotations and intellectual discomforts inseparable from major art and thought. The conjunction of an élite profoundly ill at

ease in respect of its own status and function in a mass-consumer Eden together with a *profanum vulgus* numerically enormous and committed to self-flattering passivity in the face of excellence is, precisely, that which would generate the 'exhibitionist conservatism', the archival ostentation, of American cultural emporia. The incunabula and first editions shimmer inert in the hushed sanctuary of the Beinecke Library in New Haven, untouched by human hands (as is most of American bread). The Stradivarius hangs mute in the electronically-guarded case.

An élite "profoundly ill at ease": why should it be? Those Americans who have troubled to consider the matter at all have entertained the shrewd suspicion that high culture and the hierarchic structure of artistic-intellectual values on the European model are not an unmixed blessing. From Thoreau to Trilling, there has been in the sensibility of the American *intelligentsia* a nagging doubt about the relations between the humanities and the humane, between institutions of intellect and the quality of political-social practices. It is not only (a point made emphatically in Whitman) that such institutions are exclusive, that they select against the common man in an inevitable subversion of genuine democracy. This would be damaging enough, given the American experiment in equal human worth. It is that the fabric of high literacy in the Periclean and European vein offers little protection against political oppression and folly. Civilization, in the elevated and formal sense, does not guarantee civility, does not inhibit social violence and waste. No mob, no storm-troop has ever hesitated to come down the Rue Descartes. It is from exquisite Renaissance loggias that totalitarian hooligans proclaim their will. Great meta-physicians can become rectors of ancient universities in, at least, the early days of the Reich. Indeed, the relations between evaluative appreciation of serious music, the fine arts, serious literature on the one hand and political behaviour on the other are so oblique that they invite the suspicion that high culture, far from arresting barbarism, can give to barbarism a peculiar zest and veneration. American thinkers on the theory and practice of culture have long sensed this paradox. The price which the Athenian oligarchy, the Florentine city-regime, the France of Louis XIV or the Germany of Heidegger and Furtwängler have paid for their aesthetic-intellectual brilliance is too steep. The sacrifice of social justice, of distributive equity, of sheer decency of political usage implicit in this price is simply too great. If a choice must be made, let humane mediocrity prevail. Feeling the manifest force of this line of

insight, having articulated this force within its own expressive means, the American cultural establishment is sceptical of itself and apologetic towards the community at large. This self-doubt and defensiveness have produced a subtle range of attitudes all the way from mandarin withdrawal to public penitence. It is the latter, with its embarrassing rhetoric of radical *angst*, with its attempts to obtain forgiveness and even approval from the young, which has been particularly prominent during and since the start of the civil rights movements and the Vietnam war. It is not merely that there has been, exactly along the lines of Benda's prophetic analysis, a "treason of the clerics": the clerics have sought pardon and rejuvenation by seeking to strip themselves of their own calling. One need hardly add that this masochist exhibitionism is often dramatized by the inherent malaise of the Jewish intellectual and middle-man of ideas in an essentially gentile setting. But let me repeat: whatever the unappetizing, risible currency of scholars or teachers seeking to howl with the wolves of the so-called 'counter-culture', the roots of their anguish reach deep and to a valid centre. The correlations between classic literacy and political justice, between the civic institutionalization of intellectual excellence and the general tenor of social decency, between a meritocracy of the mind and the overall chances for common progress, *are* indirect and, it may well be, *negative*. It is this latter possibility, with all that it comports of paradox and suffering, that I want to turn to in the final motion of my argument.

That the "touchstones" of human genius are the products of the very few, that the number of those truly equipped to recognise, experience existentially and then transmit these "touchstones" is also limited are, I submit, self-evident truths, almost banalities. The genesis of supreme art or thought or mathematical imagining resists adequate analysis, let alone predictive or experimental control. But historical record does suggest something of the matrix of creation, of the individual and contextual elements in, through which the alchemy of great art or philosophy operates. One element seems to be that of privacy *in extremis*, of a cultivation of solitude verging on the pathological (Montaigne's tower, Kierkegaard's room, Nietzsche's clandestine peregrinations). Or to put it contrastively: absolute thought is antisocial, resistant to gregariousness, perhaps autistic. It is a leprosy which seeks apartness. Now there is in American history and consciousness a recurrent motif of solitude. But it is *not* the solitude of Diogenes or of Descartes. To enforce the difference, to show how profoundly civic and neighbourly was Thoreau's stay at Walden Pond,

would need careful documentation. But the fact is there, I think. And in the American grain, as a whole, it is gregariousness, suspicion of privacy, a therapeutic distaste in the face of personal apartness and self-exile, which are dominant. In the new Eden, God's creatures move in herds. The therapeutic primal impulse, as Rieff has argued, extends further. The American instinct is one of succour, privately and socially, of companionable cure for the infections of body and soul. In America epilepsy is no holier than beggary. Where body or soul sicken, medication is the categorical imperative of personal decency and political hope. But one need not mouth romantic platitudes on art and infirmity, on genius and madness, on creativity and suffering, in order to suppose that absolute thought, the commitment of one's life to a gamble on transcendence, the destruction of domestic and social relations in the name of art and 'useless' speculation, are part of a phenomenology which is, in respect of the utilitarian, social norm, pathological. There *is* a strategy of chosen illness in Archimedes' decision to die rather than relinquish a geometric deduction (this gesture being the talisman of a true clerisy). And there *are* contiguities, too manifold, too binding for doubt between the acceptance, indeed the nurture of physical and emotional singularity on the one hand and the production of classic art and reflection on the other. The inhibitions, the cruel handicaps imposed upon, available to a Pascal, a Mozart, a Van Gogh, a Galois (the begetter of modern algebraic topology done to deliberate death at the age of twenty-one), the *cordon sanitaire* which a Wittgenstein could draw around himself in order to secure minimal physical survival and total autonomy of spirit — these are not only hard to come by in the teeming benevolence of the new world, they are actively countered. It is almost a definition of America to say that it is a *Prinzip Hoffnung* (Ernst Bloch's famous term for the institutionalized, programmatic eschatology of hope) in which a psychiatric social worker waits on Oedipus, in which a family counselling service attends on Lear. 'And there are, my dear Dostoevsky, cures for epilepsy.'

The point has been made often (most acutely in James's *Golden Bowl* and in Henry Adam's *Education*). American history is replete with tragic occasion. But such occasion is precisely that: a contingent disaster, a failing to be amended, the fault of circumstances which are to be altered or avoided. The American Adam is not an innocent — far from it. But he is a corrector of errors. He has, after its brief and creative role in the New England temper, all but abandoned even the

metaphor of original sin. The notion that the human condition is, ontologically, one of 'dis-grace', that cruelty and social injustice are not mechanical defects but 'primaries' or 'elementals' in history, will seem to him defeatist mysticism. No less so the hunch that there are between tragic historicism, between the concept of 'fallen man' and the generation of the unageing monuments of intellect and of art instrumental affinities. It may be that these monuments, born of autistic vision, are counter-statements to a world felt, known to be 'fallen'. There is in eminent art and thought a manichaeian rebellion. "A veritable soul," taught Alain, the French *maître de pensée* (itself a phrase significantly untranslatable), "is the refusal of a body." There can be no didactic sophistry more un-American, no ideal more alien to the pragmatic immanence of "the pursuit of happiness."

The upshot is this. There is little evidence that civilization civilizes any but a small minority or that its deployment is effective outside the elusive domain of enhanced private sensibility. The relations of such enhancement to civic standards of behaviour, to political good sense, are, at best tangential. There is, on the other hand, substantial evidence to suggest that the generation and full valuation of eminent art and thought will come to pass (preferentially, it seems) under conditions of individual *anomie*, of anarchic or even pathological unsociability and in contexts of political autocracy — be it oligarchic *ancien regime* or totalitarian in the modern cast. "Censorship is the mother of metaphor," notes Borges; "we artists are olives," says Joyce, "squeeze us." Czarist and post-1917 Russia is the acid test. From Pushkin to Alexander Zinoviev, the central fact of Russian poetry, drama, fiction, literary theory, music has been that of official repression and Aesopian or clandestine response. The lineage of genius is utterly unbroken. Stalinism and the feline bureaucracies of blackmail after Stalin have witnessed, are witnessing at this very moment, a literary output which is truly fantastic in its formal virtuosity and compulsion of spirit. To cite Mandelstam, Akhmatova, Tsvetayeva, Pasternak, Brodsky is to refer, with almost careless selectivity, to an incomparable breadth and depth of poetic presence. This breadth and presence have been matched, perhaps even excelled, in the fiction of Pasternak, Bulgakov, Siniavsky, V. Iskander, Zinoviev, G. Vladimirov and literally a score of other masters much of whose writing is not yet available in English. To set

against Nadezhda Mandelstam's memoirs, against Solzhenitsyn's first novels, against the philosophic-Rabelaisian leviathans of Zinoviev, against Natalie Ginzbourg's autobiography, against *Zhivago* and Pasternak's translations even the most powerful of modern American narrative or personal statement, is to court a bewildering sense of disproportion. The specific gravities, the authorities and necessities of felt life, the boldness of stylistic experiment, the urgent humanity in Russian literature probably constitute what claim there is to redemption in the modern dark ages — and have done so since Tolstoy, since Dostoevsky. By such steady light, this month's 'great American novel' is merely embarrassing. The exemplary implications, moreover, seem to extend to eastern Europe as a whole. It is one of the current characteristics of Anglo-American literacy, even in alert circles, to have almost no knowledge of the lives of the mind and of the arts between East Berlin and Leningrad, between Kiev and Prague. The volume and standard of poetry, of parable, of philosophic speculation and artistic device are inspiring. It is not the 'creative writing centres', the 'poetry workshops', the 'humanities research institutes', the foundation-financed hives for deep thinkers amid the splendours of Colorado, the Pacific coast or the New England woods we must look to for what is most compelling and far-reaching in art and ideas. It is to the studios, cafés, seminars, *samizdat* magazines and publishing houses, chamber-music groups, itinerant theatres, of Krakow and of Budapest, of Prague and of Dresden. Here, I am soberly convinced, is a reservoir of talent, of unquestioning adherence to the risks and functions of art and original thought on which generations to come will feed.

If this is so, if the correlations between extreme creativity (literally, concretely, creativity *in extremis*) and political justice are, to a significant degree at least, negative, then the American choice makes abundant sense. The flowering of the humanities is not worth the circumstance of the inhuman. No play by Racine is worth a Bastille, no Mandelstam poem an hour of Stalinism. If one intuits, believes and comes to institutionalize this credo of social decency and democratic hope, it must follow that utmost thought and art will have to be imported from outside. The bacteria of personal anarchy, of tragic pessimism, of elective affinity with and against political violence or authoritarian control which western art and thought have carried with them from their inception, must be made sterile. As are the curare tips on the Amerindian arrow-heads in our museums of ethnography

or natural science. The fundamental, if subconscious, strategy of American culture is that of an immaculate astrodome enveloping, making transparent to a mass audience, preserving from corruption and misuse, the cancerous and daemonic pressures of antique, of European, of Russian invention and tragic being (“destroyer of cities . . . anarchic Aphrodite” said Auden). Here lie the archives of Eden.

Which brings up a final point. The preference of democratic endeavor over authoritarian caprice, of an open society over one of creative hermeticism and censorship, of a general dignity of mass status over the perpetuation of an élite (often inhumane in its style and concerns), is, I repeat, a thoroughly justifiable choice. It very likely represents what meagre chances there are for social progress and a more bearable distribution of resources. He who makes this choice and lives accordingly deserves nothing but attentive respect. What is puerile hypocrisy and opportunism is the stance, the rhetoric, the professional practice of those — and they have been legion in American academe or the media — *who want it both ways*. Of those who profess to experience, to value, to transmit authentically the contagious mystery of great intellect and art while they are in fact dismembering it or packaging it to death. For the exigent truth is this: a genuine teacher, editor, critic, art historian, musical performer or musicologist, is one who has committed his existence to a consuming passion, who cultivates in himself, to the very limits of his secondary skills, those autistic absolutes of possession and of self-possession which produce an Archimedean theorem or a Rembrandt canvas. He is a man or woman gratefully, proudly sick with thought, hooked, past cure, on the drug of knowledge, of critical perception, of transference to the future. He knows that ninety-nine percent of humanity in the developed west may aspire to only one vestige of immortality: an entry in the telephone book; but he knows also that there is one per cent, perhaps less, whose written word alters history, whose paintings change the light and the landscape, whose music takes immortal root in the ear of the mind, whose ability to put in the speech of mathematics coherent worlds wholly outside sensual reach, make up the dignity of the species. He himself is not of this one per cent. He is, as Pushkin calls him, the ‘necessary courier’ or, as I have called him in this paper, a loving, a clairvoyant parasite. He is an obsessed servant of the text, of the musical score, of the metaphysical proof, of the painting. This obsession overrides the claims of social justice. It abides the hideous fact that hundreds of thousands could be fed on the price a museum pays for one Raphael or Picasso. It is an

obsession which registers, in some crazy way, the possibility that the neutron bomb (destroyer of nameless peoples, preserver of libraries, museums, archives, book-stores) may be the final weapon of the intellect.

I have said 'obsession', 'contagion', even 'craziness', for such is the condition of the cleric. Of the master teacher. Of the virtuoso executant. Of the unappeased bibliographer. Of the translator literally devoured by his mastering original. By all means, let such a condition be ridiculed and resisted in the name of common sense, civics, and political humanity. But it is not *we* (a category which includes *you* by virtue of the simple fact that you are reading this essay, that you possess the vocabulary, codes of reference, leisure and *interest* needed to read it) who can mask, water down or even deny our calling. It is for, through the great philosophic texts, musical compositions, works of art, poems, theorems that we conduct our ecstatic lives. To espouse — a justly sacramental verb — these objects while seeking to deny the conditions of person and of society from which they have come to us, from which they continue to come, *this* is treason and mendacious schizophrenia. As one Kierkegaard put it: Either/Or.

The choice is not a comfortable one. But perhaps the concept of choice is itself a fallacy. As I have implied throughout, the intellectual, the inebriate of thought is, like the artist or philosopher, though to a lesser degree, born and not made (*nascitur non fit*, as every school boy used to know). He has no choice except to be himself or to betray himself. If 'happiness' in the definitions central to the theory and practice of "the American way of life" seems to him the greater good, if he does not suspect 'happiness' in almost any guise of being the despotism of the ordinary, he is in the wrong business. They order these matters better in the world of the Gulag. Artists, thinkers, writers receive the unwavering tribute of political scrutiny and repression. The KGB and the serious writer are in total accord when both know, when both *act on the knowledge* that a sonnet (Pasternak simply citing the first line of a Shakespeare sonnet in the venomous presence of Zhdanov), a novel, a scene from a play can be the power-house of human affairs, that there is nothing more charged with the detonators of dreams and action than the word, particularly the word known by heart. (It is striking and perfectly consequent that America, the final archive, should also be the land whose schooling has all but eradicated memorization. In the microfiche, the poem lies embalmed; recited inwardly, it is terribly alive.) The scholar in the

Soviet Union understands precisely what the KGB censor is after when he seizes and minutely scans his article on Hegel. It is in such articles, in the debates they unleash, that lie the motor forces of social crisis. The abstract painter, the composer in the perennial twilight of the Soviet setting know that there is in serious art and music no such thing as inapplicable formality or technical neutrality. A technique, says Sartre, is already a metaphysic. From a Kandinsky, from a Bach canon can stream the subterranean impulses towards political and social metamorphosis. These impulses reach only the few (or at first), but in authoritarian societies, in societies where the word and the idea have *auctoritas*, meaning and action work from the top. To imprison a man because he quotes *Richard III* during the 1937 purges, to arrest him in Prague today because he is giving a seminar on Kant, is to gauge accurately the status of great literature and philosophy. It is to honour perversely, but to honour nevertheless, the obsession that is truth.

What text, what painting, what symphony could shake the edifice of American politics? What act of abstract thought really matters at all? Who *cares*?

Today, the question is this: which carries the greater threat to the conception of literature and intellectual argument of the first order — the apparatus of political oppression in Russia and in Latin America (currently the most brilliant ground for the novelist), the sclerosis in the meritocracy and ‘classicism’ of old Europe *or* a consensus of spiritual-social values in which the television showing of “Holocaust” is interrupted every fourteen minutes by commercials, in which gas-oven sequences are interspersed and financed by ads for panty-hose and deodorants?

The question is overwrought and unappetizing. It contains oversimplification, of course. But it is a question which those of us who are by infirmity and summons accomplices to the life of the mind must ask ourselves. It is, I suspect, a question which that antique ironist, history, will force us to answer. In Archimedes’ garden, barbarism and the theorem were interwoven. That garden may have been a ‘counter-Eden’; but it happens to be the one in which you and I must continue our labour. My hunch is that it lies in Syracuse still — Sicily, that is, rather than New York.