THE ORIGINS OF MODERN CONSCIOUSNESS

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Contents

Preface 7

Foreword by Randall M. Whaley 9

Introduction by John Weiss 11

I The Reorientation of American Culture in the 1890's John Higham 25

II The Concept of Nature Alfred William Levi 49

III The Secret World of Jean Barois: Notes on the Portrait of an Age Eugen Weber 79

IV The Tortoise and the Hare: A Study of Valery, Freud, and Leonardo da Vinci Roger Shattuck 111

V Friedrich Meinecke, Historian of a World in Crisis Gerhard Masur 133

VI Dialogs Across the Centuries: Weber, Marx, Hegel, Luther Benjamin Nelson 149

VII The Declasicalization of Physics George Gamow 167
nious and fruitless debate, that of assigning national priorities or first claims. Instead he has discerned mutual influence and national variations within what one might call a common style.

For details, let the reader turn to John Higham's fine discussion. Let it be merely noted here that he will find many examples of American thinkers who joined with European intellectuals in the attack on the closed systems, formalistic abstractions, and ideological absolutisms of the nineteenth century. He will find the essential modern and pragmatic attitude much in evidence—the attempt, using Mr. Higham's words, to "create meanings out of the flux of experience." The reader will also find neo-liberalism in its American form, the "decadent" movement in literature, the doctrines of heroic vitalism and the will-to-power, and above all, America's most impressive contribution to the education of Europe, the great William James. As we read the words Mr. Higham uses to tell us of his three principles, William James, Frederick Jackson Turner, and Frank Lloyd Wright, we will have no difficulty, I think, in grasping their international application to the entire generation that gave life to the origins of modern consciousness:

James, Wright and Turner were in their own ways hardy, fighting men, full of the zest for new experience, in love with novelty and experiment, eager to adapt philosophy, architecture, and history to the ever-changing needs of the present hour. James himself struck the distinctive note of the 1890's by interpreting all ideas as plans for action and exalting the will. . . . Intellectually, their deepest affinity arose from a common opposition to all closed and static patterns of order. James's repugnance for a "block universe" is well known. "All 'classic,' clean, cut and dried, 'noble,' 'fixed,' 'eternal' Weltanschauungen seem to me to violate the character with which life concretely comes and the expression which it bears of being, or at least involving, a muddle and a struggle."

The Reorientation of American Culture in the 1890's

by John Higham

In 1894 a group of Dartmouth alumni asked Richard Hovey, a young and dedicated poet, to write a new college song for his alma mater. Dartmouth's heritage of Puritan piety had faded; its rural isolation no longer seemed an asset; the school needed a fresh, up-to-date public image. This Hovey obligingly supplied in the rousingly successful "Men of Dartmouth":

They have the still North in their hearts,
The hill-winds in their veins,
And the granite of New Hampshire
In their muscles and their brains.¹

We may smile today at this chilly, rockbound portrait, so naively and unconsciously anti-intellectual. Yet it exactly suited the emerging, collegiate spirit of the day. Hovey's song not only subordinated 'mind to muscle; it also associated both of these with the ruggedness of nature rather than the refinements of culture. In doing so, it turned the disadvantage of Dartmouth's location into an asset: it suggested to the men of Dartmouth their particular claim to the virility that college men throughout the country eagerly desired.
THE ORIGINS OF MODERN CONSCIOUSNESS

A rage for competitive athletics and for out-of-doors activities of all kinds was sweeping the campuses of the nation. A combative team spirit became virtually synonymous with college spirit; and athletic prowess became a major determinant of institutional status. Football made the greatest impact. Sedulously cultivated by Yale in the 1880's, it expanded into a big business after Walter Camp in 1889 named the first All-American team. But football dominated only the autumn; other seasons required their appropriate rites. Older sports such as baseball and track flourished in the spring. To fill the winter gap and to arrest the flight of students from the confines of the gymnasium, a YMCA teacher invented basketball in 1891. It was taken up almost at once. Intercollegiate wrestling matches soon followed. Dartmouth, following Hovey's lead, learned to feature skiing and winter carnivals.

The transformation of the colleges into theaters of organized physical combat deserves our attention because it illustrates the master impulse that seized the American people in the 1890's and reshaped their history in the ensuing decades. Theodore Roosevelt articulated that impulse in a famous speech delivered in 1899, "The Strenuous Life." Denouncing "the soft spirit of the cloistered life" and "the base spirit of gain," Roosevelt told his listeners to "boldly face the life of strife... for it is only through strife, through hard and dangerous endeavor, that we shall ultimately win the goal of true national greatness." If these words struck the keynote of Roosevelt's own career, they also sounded the tocsin of a new era. Countless others, in their various ways, expressed similar feelings. John Jay Chapman, a leading cultural critic, flayed the tepid conformity, the pervasive desire to please, the shuffling and circumspection, the "lack of passion in the American." Even Henry James—surely as inhibited and cerebral a novelist as America has produced—put into the mouths of his emotionally starved protagonists a choked cry for vivifying experience. "Don't forget that you're young," Strether tells little Bilham in The Ambassadors. "Live all you can; it's a mistake not to. It doesn't so much matter what you do in particular, so long as you have your life." Common folk felt much the same way. From their scorn of frailty and evasion, Americans minted a whole range of new epithets, which gained currency in the 1890's: sissy, pussyfoot, cold feet, stuffed shirt.

From the middle of the nineteenth century until about 1890 Americans on the whole had submitted docilely enough to the gathering restrictions of a highly industrialized society. They learned to live in cities, to sit in rooms cluttered with bric-a-brac, to limit the size of their families, to accept the authority of professional elites, to mask their aggressions behind a thickening façade of gentility, and to comfort themselves with a faith in automatic material progress. Above all, Americans learned to conform to the discipline of machinery. The time clock, introduced into offices and factories in the early 1890's, signaled an advanced stage in the mechanization of life.

By that time a profound spiritual reaction was developing. It took many forms, but it was everywhere a hunger to break out of the frustrations, the routine, and the sheer dullness of an urban-industrial culture. It was everywhere an urge to be young, masculine, and adventurous. In the 1890's the new, activist mood was only beginning to challenge the restraint and decorum of the "Gilded Age." Only after 1897, when the oppressive weight of a long, grim economic depression lifted, did a demand for vivid and masterful experience dominate American politics. Yet the dynamism that characterized the whole political and social scene from the turn of the century through World War I emerged during the 1890's in large areas of popular culture. To some of these areas historians have not yet paid enough attention to appreciate the extent and nature of the change that was occurring. We are well aware of the aggressive nationalism that sprang up after 1890. We do not so often notice analogous ferment in other spheres: a boom in sports and recreation; a revitalized interest in untamed nature; a quickening of popular music; an unsettling of the condition of women.
THE ORIGINS OF MODERN CONSCIOUSNESS

The sports revolution in the colleges was part of a much broader upsurge of enthusiasm for outdoor recreation and physical culture in the American public at large. The growing zest for both spectator and participant sports amazed contemporary observers in the early nineties. The most universal sport was bicycling, one of the great crazes of the decade. Primarily social and recreational rather than a means of necessary transportation, bicycles reached a total of one million in 1893 and ten million in 1900. Bicycle clubs and championship races excited enormous interest. Among games, baseball retained its primacy at both the professional and sandlot levels. It did not, however, enjoy the sensational growth of other sports that catered more directly to a taste for speed or a taste for violence. Racing of various kinds, to say nothing of basketball, satisfied one; football and boxing fulfilled the other. Only boxing, among the spectacles of the nineties, grew as rapidly as football in public appeal. Most states of the union still outlawed professional prize-fighting as a relic of barbarism. Nevertheless, it began to lose its unsavory reputation after 1892, when padded gloves replaced bare fists and "Gentleman Jim" Corbett displayed an artful technique in defeating John L. Sullivan. Henceforth heavyweight champions loomed large among American folk heroes.

An accompanying gospel of health through rugged exercise spread literally by leaps and bounds. Of the many shamans who arose to lead the cult, Bernarr Macfadden was the most successful. His career began at the World's Fair in Chicago in 1893, where he demonstrated the muscular attractions of an exerciser. He advanced through health clubs and lectures and won a national audience as publisher of the magazine Physical Culture. The first issue, appearing in 1899, flaunted his slogan: "Weakness Is a Crime."9

Closely linked with the boom in sports and health came an enthusiasm for the tonic freshness and openness of nature. This too had both a participant and a spectator aspect. At its mildest, participation meant escaping to the country astride a bicycle, taking up the newly imported game of golf, or going to the innumerable vacation resorts that emphasized their outdoor facilities. Somewhat more strenuously, it meant hiking and camping. In 1889 nature-lovers launched a campaign in behalf of California's redwood forests, and Congress in the following year created Yosemite, Sequoia, and General Grant National Parks. During the ensuing decade hundreds of nature-study clubs formed to encourage amateur naturalists. At least fifty-two periodicals devoted to wild life began publication.10 In fact, the flood of nature writing, based on intimate knowledge and vivid observation, registered a major shift in popular interests. Only the leading novelists exceeded the popularity of some of the nature writers, such as John Muir and Ernest Thompson Seton, whose first books appeared in 1894 and 1898 respectively.11

Although the outdoors movement clearly drew upon a traditional American distrust of the city, it also ministered to the more general psychological discontents of the 1890's. Among the values that middle-class Americans were rediscovering in nature, two stand out. For one, the great outdoors signified spaciousness—an imaginative release from the institutional restraints and confinements Americans had accepted since the Civil War. It is suggestive that one of the most prominent features of the return to nature was a veritable craze for bird-watching. In a six-year period New York and Boston publishers sold more than 70,000 textbooks on birds, while a children's magazine, Birds, reached a circulation of 40,000 in its first year of publication.12 Congress had chosen a great soaring bird as the national emblem over a century before, and a bird on the wing continued to symbolize for Americans the boundless space they wished to inhabit.

Secondly, nature meant—as Hovey's description of Dartmouth men indicated—virility. It represented that masculine hardiness and power that suddenly seemed an absolutely indispensable remedy for the artificiality and effete ness of late nineteenth-century life. Nothing revealed the craving for nature's untamed strength so well as the best-selling fiction of the late nine-
ties. For decades the popular novel had concentrated on domestic or rococo subjects rather than wilderness adventures. Above the level of the dime novel, the wild West had played very little part in fiction since the 1850's. Now it came back with a rush in a best-selling Canadian thriller, Ralph Connor's *Black Rock* (1898), in Jack London's red-blooded stories of the Klondike, and in Owen Wister's classic cowboy tale, *The Virginian* (1902). In effect, these and other writers were answering James Lane Allen's plea of 1897 for a reassertion of the masculine principle of virility and instinctive action in a literature too much dominated by the feminine principle of refinement and delicacy.\(^{13}\)

A similarly muscular spirit invaded popular verse and music. The conventional style of song in the late nineteenth century was mournful and nostalgic. The fascination with death in such poems as Eugene Field's "Little Boy Blue," and with parting in such hit tunes as "After the Ball," betrayed a loss of youthfulness of American culture. Against this drowsy mood, a new generation of high-spirited poets and musicians affirmed the masculine principle. Richard Hovey, who aspired to higher things, won a great popular success as co-author of *Songs from Vagabondia* (1894), which perfectly expressed the fresh out-of-doors spirit. Like no poems since Whitman's, these combined the love of nature, the freedom of the open road, the rollicking comradeship of men, and the tang of vivid experience.\(^{14}\)

Meanwhile, cheerful energetic tunes spread from the midways and the outdoors amusement parks that were themselves symptoms of a new era. "Ta-ra-ra-boom-der-e," first published in 1891, struck a new, rhythmically vital note. Thereafter itinerant Negro pianists taught the white public the excitement of ragtime, a form of syncopation applied against a steady bass rhythm. A high-kicking dance step called the cakewalk spread along with the ragtime craze. In vain, custodians of respectability denounced this "nigger music" and the "vulgar," "filthy" prancing that went with it.\(^{15}\)

Both the new music and the new athleticism contributed to the emergence of the New Woman. Her salient traits were boldness and radiant vigor. She shed the Victorian languor that had turned American middle-class society—as William Dean Howells noted in 1872—into a hospital for invalid females. Women took to the open road in tremendous numbers on bicycles suitably altered by an American inventor. They sat for portraits clutching tennis rackets; they might be seen at the new golf clubs or at the race tracks smoking cigarettes. In 1901 they could learn from Bernarr Macfadden's book, *The Power and Beauty of Superb Womanhood*, that vigorous exercise "will enable a woman to develop in every instance muscular strength almost to an equal degree with man."\(^{16}\)

Running, jumping, and natation, navigation, ambulation—So she seeks for recreation in a whirl.

She's a highly energetic, undissuadable, magnetic,

Peripatetic, athletic kind of girl!\(^{17}\)

The New Woman was masculine also in her demand for political power. The women's suffrage movement had been crotchety and unpopular; now it blossomed into a great nation-wide middle-class force. Significantly, its only state-wide victories prior to 1910 were won in the wide open spaces of the Rocky Mountain West.\(^{18}\)

While women became more manly, men became more martial. By 1890 the sorrow and weariness left by the Civil War had passed; jingoism and a deliberate cultivation of the military virtues ensued. The United States picked quarrels with Italy, Chile, and Great Britain before it found a satisfactory target in the liberation of Cuba. A steady build-up of naval power accompanied these crises. One interesting feature of the rising respect for military prowess was an extraordinary cult of Napoleon. The first two instalments of Ida Tarbell's biography of Napoleon in *McClure's Magazine* doubled its paid circulation; and hers was only one of twenty-eight books about the Corsican general published in the United States in the three years from 1894 to 1896. For a collective symbol of the strenuous life, myth-makers depended heavily
on the Anglo-Saxon race, which they endowed with unprecedented ferocity. A Kansas senator, for example, proudly described his race as “the most arrogant and rapacious, the most exclusive and indomitable in history.”

Meanwhile flag ceremonies, such as the newly-contrived pledge of allegiance, entered the school houses of the land. Patriotic societies multiplied as never before. In function they resembled the cheer leaders who were becoming so prominent a part of the big football spectacles, and who lifted the massed ranks of students into a collective glory. The link between the new athleticism and the new jingoism was especially evident in the yellow press: William Randolph Hearst’s New York Journal created the modern sports page in 1896, just when its front page filled with atrocity stories of the bloody debauchery of Spanish brutes in Cuba. At the same time the new music produced such martial airs as John Philip Sousa’s masterpiece of patriotic fervor, “Stars and Stripes Forever” (1897), and “A Hot Time in the Old Town” (1896), which Theodore Roosevelt adopted as the official song of his Rough Riders. Indeed, Roosevelt was the outstanding fugleman of the whole gladiatorial spirit. He loved the great outdoors, the challenge of sports, the zest of political combat, the danger of war. He exhorted women to greater fecundity. He brought boxing into the White House and contributed immensely to its respectability.

The change in temper I have been describing did not occur in the United States alone. It swept over much of western Europe about the same time. Its most obvious manifestations appeared in the navalism and jingoism of the time: the various national defense societies, the Pan-German League, the bombast of Wilhelm II, the sensational journalism of the Harmsworth brothers, the emotions that swirled around General Boulanger and Captain Dreyfus. Europe was perhaps more receptive than America to the militaristic aspects of the new mood. Two Englishmen, H. Rider Haggard and Rudyard Kipling, popularized the martial and masculine adventure story before respectable American authors turned to that genre. In other respects, however, America may

have some claim to priority and leadership. The outdoors movement may have started in America, although England and Germany were not far behind. The New Woman, together with her bicycle, materialized in England and in America about the same time; but the achievement of political rights and economic independence came more easily in this country than anywhere in Europe. The very phrase “New Woman” may have originated in the talk of an American character in an English novel that had its greatest success in the United States. Sarah Grand’s The Heavenly Twins, published in 1893, expounded feminist ideas in a glamorous setting and sold five times as many copies in America as in England.

In the sports revival, which also affected both continents, Americans seized a commanding lead. No people except the British loved athletic contests so much; and the Americans clearly excelled in ferocity. They won most of the events in the early Olympic Games, nine out of fourteen at Athens in 1896 and fourteen out of twenty at Paris in 1900. They racked up a disproportionate number of “world records.” They so dominated professional boxing that the championship of the United States became, from 1892 onward, identical with that of the world. A French observer, bemused by the American taste for pugilism, concluded that it was “too brutal a sight for a Frenchman of the nineteenth century.”

On the other hand, Europeans were intoxicated by the energy of American music. “Ta-ra-ra-boom-deer-e” spread through Britain and beyond like an epidemic. “No other song ever took a people in quite the same way,” an English historian tells us. “It would seem to have been the absurd ça ira of a generation bent upon kicking over the traces.” Translated into French as “Tha-maraboom-di-hé,” the song proved a great hit in the leading Parisian cabarets. Across the Atlantic also went the cake walk, dazzling the music halls of London and Paris, and Sousa’s band, giving Europe its first taste of ragtime. The taste suited. In 1908 Claude Debussy used this American idiom for The Golliwog’s Cakewalk.
THE ORIGINS OF MODERN CONSCIOUSNESS

The United States was not merely involved in the newly aggressive and exuberant mood of Europe; it was one of the instigators.

Can as much be said about American high culture during the same period? Were American art, literature, philosophy, and social thought undergoing an awakening comparable to the upheaval in popular feelings? Were American intellectuals significantly involved in the psychic turbulence so widespread in Western civilization? I believe they were. On both continents the sensitive as well as the vulgar felt the quickening call to strenuous experience. Although trans-Atlantic communication of ideas was intermittent and usually sluggish, a common cultural crisis in the 1890's affected intellectuals throughout the Western World.

This crisis followed upon the dominion that a materialistic outlook had won during the immediately preceding decades. From the 1860's through the 1880's, in Europe and America alike, the combined prestige of science and business enterprise shaped the direction of thought. During these years romantic idealism declined. So did religious vitality in the face of a sweeping secularization of values. Ornateness and a certain heaviness of style prevailed. All encompassing, monistic systems of thought were in favor: Spencerian and Hegelian systems contended in America; Comtean positivism and Marxian socialism loomed large in Europe. A triumphant belief in evolutionary progress, although much stronger in America than in Europe, everywhere blunted moral sensitivity.

By 1890 this vesture of assurance and complacency was wearing through. If failed to cover the emotional and material needs of the laboring classes; it did not entirely smother the conscience of the middle class; and it was too tight a fit for many intellectuals. For the latter, the cult of progress, stability, and materialism was becoming oppressive and suffocating. It brought restraint and uniformity into the world of thought without resolving the increasing conflicts in society.

The first response of intellectuals to the obvious social dis-

THE REORIENTATION OF AMERICAN CULTURE IN THE 1890's

locations of an urban, industrial age was an attempt to strengthen the framework of order and to reinterpret the path of progress. The equipment of liberalism with a collective social ethic constituted the principal achievement of social thought both in England and in America in the 1880's—a work accomplished in one by Thomas Hill Green and the Fabians, and in the other by Henry George, Lester F. Ward, William Dean Howells, and a variety of historical economists. But these ideas made only modest headway in the following decade, while the problems they addressed grew much more acute. The special significance of the 1890's lay in a change of mood that swept many intellectuals beyond the earnest sobriety of the seventies and eighties. A readjustment of rational principles in the light of existing facts seemed in itself ineffective and uninteresting.

Two other strategies were possible; and the clash between them pervaded intellectual life. One might, in contempt or despair, spurn the trust in progress and find solace in contemplating the decline of a moribund civilization. Or one might look beyond the conventional framework of thought for access to fresh sources of energy. The first alternative was the counsel of defeat, whereas the second was a call to liberation. One way led to pessimism, decadence, and withdrawal into art for art's sake. The other pointed to a heightened activity and an exuberant sense of power. Both alternatives broke sharply with the complacent faith in material progress and human rationality that had ruled the Western world for two generations. Both the pessimists and the activists of the 1890's felt that the rational schemata of their time had become closed systems, imprisoning the human spirit. Pessimists accepted the denial of responsibility and purpose. Activists, on the other hand, attacked closed systems and created meanings from the flux of experience.

The acid of defeat and the elixir of liberation mingled in the intellectual ferment of the decade. A good many Americans as well as Europeans tasted both, with lasting effect. In general, however, one may say that the elixir proved an effective antidote
to the acid. The strenuous spirit so prominent in popular culture quite generally overcame a defeatist spirit among intellectuals. The melancholy of the fin-de-siècle belied its name: it lifted before the end of the century.

This was especially the case in the United States, where a pessimistic outlook had only recently taken root in a serious way. Worldly pessimism comprised an important strain in European thought since the Enlightenment. Americans, however, had derived their sense of evil from the bracing doctrines of Calvinism, and they encountered the world with determination to resist it. Neither the terrors of personal frustration as in Poe nor the transcendental doubts of Melville had resulted in a pessimistic philosophy of life. The emergence of such an outlook was therefore a milestone in American intellectual history.

The melancholy and the ennui that invaded certain fastidious American minds in the late eighties and early nineties bore the direct imprint of European decadence. Schopenhauer together with Spinoza and Lucretius provided the basic philosophical structure for most of the poetry that George Santayana wrote in the nineties; Leopardi, Swinburne, and the English aesthetes supplied additional models for the circle of Harvard poets that formed around Santayana in those years. In New York Edgar Saltus, who also began from Schopenhauer, published delicately scandalous novels resembling those of Oscar Wilde in their knowing insolence and perverse wit. Others were reading Ernest Renan appreciatively. Renan instructed Henry Adams in the artistic uses of a spiritually exhausted religion, as Adams drifted from the South Seas to the cathedrals of France. 26 The same lesson reached a wide public through Harold Frederic's best-selling novel, The Damnation of Theron Ware (1896). Here an ultra-civilized, skeptical Catholic priest reveals to a simple-minded Methodist clergyman the world-weary elegance of a religion of art. "The truth is always relative, Mr. Ware," Father Forbes concludes. 29

Other writers, untouched by European aestheticism, arrived at a grimmer sort of pessimism. There was, for example, the savage irony of the San Francisco journalist, Ambrose Bierce, whose first book of short stories, Tales of Soldiers and Civilians (1891), depicted a pointless, mocking destiny. There was Henry Adams' brother, Brooks, whose Law of Civilization and Decay (1895) diagnosed the decline of Western civilization since the defeat of Napoleon and its impending dissolution. This powerful, serious book was perhaps the first modern formulation of a cyclical theory of history. It was certainly the first full length American critique of the conception of history as progress. More informally, Mark Twain was reaching the same conclusion. His laughter turned increasingly into bitterness, visions of destruction welled up at the end of The Connecticut Yankee (1889), and by the late nineties an explicit fatalism convinced Twain that history was an endless cycle of cruelty and corruption, "a barren and meaningless process." 30 E. L. Godkin too was giving up hope for the future of American civilization. The toughest minded of all of the nation's social philosophers, William Graham Sumner, was warning his fellow countrymen that the utmost they could do was "to note and record their course as they are carried along" in the great stream of time. 31

Such attitudes exemplified the naturalistic determinism that originated with Darwin and Spencer and became increasingly oppressive as the century waned. Until the 1890's American intellectuals had tempered the naturalistic creed with a supreme confidence in their own destiny. In Europe evolutionary thought slipped more easily into a dark vision of a blind and purposeless universe. Thus the naturalistic novel, in which man appears as the hapless plaything of great impersonal forces, was well established in France and England before Stephen Crane in 1893 published Maggie, the first American example of the genre. Pessimism seems to have invaded American minds only after the actual course of social change clearly refuted the liberating significance Americans had imputed to the evolutionary process. By 1890 the consolidation of big organizations, the massing of population, and the growing intensity of class conflict were inescapably apparent.
These trends did not at all correspond to the individualizing movement that Herbert Spencer had confidently envisioned. Instead of an inevitable development from an "incoherent homogeneity to a definite, coherent heterogeneity," Brooks Adams observed a steady centralization and a loss of vital energy, which would result in anarchy. Henry refined the theory into one of a general degradation and dispersion of energy. Many felt an erosion of their own independent station in society. Clearly, the survival of the fittest was not synonymous, as Darwhinians formerly supposed, with the survival of the best. Nor did the course of events conform to the ancient belief in America's uniqueness, confidence in which had always provided an ultimate bulwark of the national faith in progress. "We are the first Americans," Woodrow Wilson gravely warned, "to entertain any serious doubts about the superiority of our own institutions as compared with the systems of Europe."

A signal indication of the intensity of concern over these defeatist attitudes was the feverish discussion provoked by Max Nordau's book, Degeneration. I believe that no other European book of any kind published during the entire decade aroused so much comment in the American press. Even before its translation into English in 1895, the book received a long review in The Critic. Soon the Sunday supplements and the daily papers were trumpeting its charges. Much of this attention resulted from the sheer sensationalism of Nordau's argument that the eminent artists and writers of the day were suffering from mental deterioration. Many, perhaps most, commentators regarded Nordau as at least as degenerate as the people he attacked. But his fundamental charge that the age was suffering from "a compound of feverish restlessness and blunted discouragement, of... vague qualms of a Dusk of Nations" touched a sensitive nerve.

When all this is said, the fact remains that pessimism became in America neither general nor profound. Sourness and irony Americans could sometimes stomach; they had little taste for despair. Even Henry Adams never ceased to struggle against despair, and Santayana transmuted it into a flawless serenity. Most American intellectuals resisted pessimism. Philosophers (with the partial exception of Santayana) rallied against it; literary critics denounced it; social scientists were challenged rather than overcome by it. Accordingly, the voices of negation rose from rather special quarters: from people who were being left behind. The most somber temperaments belonged, on the one hand, to old men like Twain and Sumner, who had fought the good fight through the seventies and eighties and who now lost heart; or they belonged, on the other hand, to men of patrician background like Adams, Saltus, and the Harvard poets, scions of old and cultivated families who felt displaced in a pushing, competitive, bourgeois world.

The naturalistic novelists cannot be included among either the old men or the patricians. They were young, and they came from middle-class homes. But it requires no close inspection to discover that Norris, Crane, London, and even Dreiser were only partly fatalistic. Unlike many European naturalists, they expressed the affirmative as well as the negative possibilities of their age. The American naturalists gloried in identifying themselves with the triumphant strength of nature or with the struggles of embattled man. Instead of observing life clinically, they celebrated power. "The world," intoned Frank Norris, "wants men, great, strong, harsh, brutal men—men with purpose who let nothing, nothing, nothing stand in their way." Dreiser and London shared Norris's fascination with the ruthless pursuit of success. Crane spent his volatile life imagining and seeking war. Here, as Van Wyck Brooks has pointed out, began the cave-man tendency in modern American literature. In the fierce joy of conflict these writers discovered the activist reply to the specter of an indifferent universe.

No one better reveals the instability of the pessimism of the nineties than its most systematic exponent, Brooks Adams. Younger and less cosmopolitan than his brother Henry, who remained generally defeatist, Brooks underwent a great conversion around 1898. He decided that the Spanish-American
War disproved his theory of history. Evidently centralization was leading not to a degradation but to a revival of national energy. Only Europe, not America, is decaying, Brooks chortled. "I am for the new world—the new America, the new empire... we are the people of destiny." And he became henceforth an activist, who bombarded his fellow countrymen with advice on geopolitical strategy and public administration.

Thus Brooks Adams illustrates two of the spheres in which the strenuous life came to intellectual fruition. The escape from pessimism flung him into reform as well as imperialism; and since imperialism proved after a short while an unattractive outlet for American effort, his attention turned increasingly in the early twentieth century to the uses of power in domestic affairs. This happened to a great many American intellectuals. We know that imperialism and progressivism were closely related crusades, and it seems clear that together they largely banished gloom and anxiety in favor of an optimistic, adventurous engagement in social change. The activism of the nineties contributed, therefore, to the hearty interest that progressive intellectuals showed in doing things, in closing with immediate practical realities, in concentrating on techniques rather than sweeping theories. The early twentieth century was not a very congenial period in America for the speculative thinker with interests remote from the facts of contemporary life. It was a time of administrative energy and functional thought.

Must we then conclude that the new activism had no constructive impact on other areas of thought, beyond concrete social issues? Did the clamorous vitality generated in the nineties exhaust itself in emotional kicks on one hand and in techniques of social reform on the other? Were its positive achievements only visceral and practical? Or did the shattering of closed systems and the relief of pessimism also enlarge the imaginative resources of American intellectuals? These questions do not admit of any final answer. But a brief comparison of three major intellectuals who participated in the cultural revolution of the 1890's may suggest how stimulating it could be in very diverse fields.

William James was neither the first of the American pragmatists nor in every respect the greatest, but he was surely the most passionately concerned with emancipating his fellow men from tradition, apathy, and routine. His predecessor Charles S. Peirce was preoccupied with traditional metaphysical and logical problems, his successor John Dewey with gaining rational control of experience. James, standing between them, was the arch-foe of all intellectual systems, less concerned with organizing thought or experience than with validating their manifold possibilities. Although each of the major pragmatists took part in the intellectual life of the 1890's, James belongs to that decade in a very special sense. Having anticipated much earlier its revolt against pessimism and fatalism, James applied himself intensively to its spiritual needs. His Principles of Psychology came out in 1890. Thereafter he grew beyond his first career as a psychologist, greatly enlarged his interests and sympathies, and launched pragmatism as a broad philosophical movement.

For James the nineties were years of fulfilment and fame. For two young men born in the 1860's—Frederick Jackson Turner and Frank Lloyd Wright—this was the crucially formative period, when the emancipation that James preached was taking effect. Turner received his Ph.D. at Johns Hopkins in 1890 and returned to Wisconsin to work out his own ideas about American history. In the next few years all of his major ideas emerged. The famous address of 1893 on the significance of the frontier announced his revolt against the eastern, European-oriented view of American history that then prevailed. In other work of the mid-nineties, Turner inaugurated a broadly economic interpretation of American history in terms of sectional cleavages. Wright, a budding Chicago architect, also declared independence in 1893 by quitting his beloved master, Louis Sullivan, and opening his own office. During the course of the decade Wright developed his own personal, flexible style in opposition both to Sullivan's sentimentality and to the conventions of the European architectural tradition. Unknown to one another, James, Turner, and Wright were the great leavening and liberat-
ing figures in their respective disciplines at the turn of the century. None of them engaged in the crude, swaggering bombast so prevalent in the popular activism of the period. Indeed, James roundly attacked people like Theodore Roosevelt who were arousing “the aboriginal capacity for murderous excitement which lies sleeping” in every bosom, and he once coolly remarked of his friend Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., that “Mere excitement is an immature ideal, unworthy of the Supreme Court’s official endorsement.” Nevertheless, James, Wright, and Turner were in their own ways hardy, fighting men, full of zest for new experience, in love with novelty and experiment, eager to adapt philosophy, architecture, and history to the ever-changing needs of the present hour. James himself struck the distinctive note of the 1890’s by interpreting all ideas as plans for action and by exalting the will.

All three men possessed exuberant, optimistic, restless personalities. Their brimming energies threatened continually to overflow any imposed discipline, so much so in the cases of James and Turner that neither succeeded in finishing the big, systematic book he wished to write. Neither in his intellectual habits was at all methodical. “Turner bubbled it out,” one of his students remembers, and the same could equally have been said of James. Wright had the strongest personality of the three. He ran away from home, scorned all formal education, and built within himself an oracular self-confidence touched with arrogance. Only Wright wore his hair long to flaunt his independence, but James and Turner also enjoyed a poetic flair and a lithe heart.

Intellectually, their deepest affinity arose from a common opposition to all closed and static patterns of order. James’s repugnance for a “block universe” is well known. “All ‘classic,’ clean, cut and dried, ‘noble,’ fixed, ‘eternal’ Weltanschauungen seem to me to violate the character with which life concretely comes and the expression which it bears of being, or at least involving, a muddle and a struggle.” This resembles Wright’s hatred of the stiff classical and Renaissance traditions in archi-

42
tecture. A dynamic flow—an image of continual becoming— pervades Wright’s buildings, and runs equally through James’s philosophy. Similarly, Turner’s history spoke always of men on the move, venturing westward, breaking the cake of custom, ever engaged in struggle and contradiction. Turner rebelled against the dominant mode of historical scholarship, which emphasized the stability and continuity embodied in the formal structure of institutions. He presented history not as a logical unfolding of constitutions but as a continual flux of experience. In breaking up American history into a balanced interplay of opposing sections, Turner accomplished what James’s pluralism achieved in philosophy and what Wright’s juxtaposition of advancing and receding planes realized in architecture.

The revolt of these men against intellectual rigidities closely paralleled the assault in popular culture upon a confined and circumscribed life. It is hardly a coincidence that Turner and Theodore Roosevelt made the frontiersman the heroic figure in American history just at the time when he was becoming the hero of best-selling novels. Nor is it happenstance that Wright did away with interior doors and widened windows just at the time when Edward Bok, editor of the Ladies Home Journal, launched spectacularly successful campaigns to clear out the clutter from parlors and the ugly litter from cities. Like so many other Americans, James, Wright, and Turner were reaching out into the open air.

All three quite literally and passionately loved the out-of-doors. James and Turner were never so happy as when they were camping in the wilderness, and Wright felt as keenly as they the moral strength to be derived from the earth. His prairie houses, stretching outward to embrace the land, attest his fidelity to his mother’s injunction, “Keep close to the earth, boy: in that lies strength.” For each of these men, nature signified not just power but also the freedom of open space. By explaining American democracy as the product of “free land,” Turner extracted a dimension of freedom from the realm of necessity; and this is what
Wright did in constructing "the new reality that is space instead of matter." Meanwhile, in philosophy, James argued against a restrictive materialism by emphasizing the incompleteness of visible nature and by calling attention to those natural facts of religious experience that suggest a vaster realm of spiritual freedom. In a sense, he too converted matter into space.

In part, the open-air activists of the nineties were harking back to the old American values affirmed by Walt Whitman, the poet who most rapturously identified himself with boundless space. Wright adored Whitman. Turner quoted him. James, the most discriminating of the three, put his finger exactly on Whitman's spaciousness:

Walt Whitman owes his importance in literature to the systematic expulsion from his writings of all contractile elements. The only sentiments he allowed himself to express were of the expansive order; and he expressed these in the first person, not as your mere monstrously conceited individual might so express them, but vicariously for all men, so that a passionate and mystic ontological emotion suffuses his words . . .

Appropriately, Whitman's reputation was just then emerging powerfully from the distrustful and evasive gentility that obscured it earlier. His flowing lines supplied the largeness and virility that more and more Americans wanted in order to overcome the "contractile elements" in late nineteenth-century culture. A biography of Whitman, published in 1896 by the influential nature-writer John Burroughs, made this appeal explicit:

Did one begin to see evil omen in this perpetual whittling away and sharpening and lightening of the American type,—grace without power, clearness without mass, intellect without character,—then take comfort from the volume and the rankness of Walt Whitman? Did one begin to fear that the decay of maternity and paternity in our older communities and the falling off in the native population presaged the drying up of the race in its very sources? Then welcome to the rank sexuality and to the athletic fatherhood and motherhood celebrated by Whitman. Did our skepticism, our headiness, our worldliness, threaten to eat us up like cancer? Did our hardness, our irreligiosity, and our passion for the genteel point to a fugitive, superficial race? Was our literature threatened with the artistic degeneration,—running all to art and not at all to power? Were our communities invaded by a dry rot of culture? Were we fast becoming a delicate, indoor genteel race? Were our women sinking deeper and deeper into the "incredible sloughs of fashion and all kinds of dyspeptic depletion,"—the antidote for all these ills is in Walt Whitman.

Evidently the new appreciation of Whitman, the anti-formalism of James, Wright, and Turner, and the various popular displays of a quasi-primitive vitality arose from a common rebellion against patterns of confinement in life and thought. Evidently also this rebellion sprang to a large extent from indigenous circumstances and energies; it does not appear to have received its primary inspiration from abroad. In fact, the new activism was accompanied by a revulsion against European cultural leadership, and the principal innovators were markedly anti-European in their social and moral attitudes. As a young man Wright refused a splendid opportunity to study architecture in Europe, all expenses paid. He felt, when he did so, that he was "only keeping faith" with America. James, oppressed by the weight of the past world in Europe, returned to the less tradition-laden atmosphere of Harvard exclaiming, "Better fifty years of Cambridge than a cycle of Cathay!" Turner, who conceived of American history as a movement away from Europe, gave our past so native a hue that his successors for half a century treated it as a largely endogenous phenomenon. All of these men associated Europe with the constraint and decrepitude they abhorred. All of them associated America with the freshness and openness they sought to revive.

Nevertheless, their rebellion paralleled a similar change in European thought and feeling, as we have already noticed in respect to popular culture. In Europe as well as America the
balance shifted from a constricting pessimism to a regenerating activism. There, too, the change may be described broadly as a reaction against the stifling atmosphere of bourgeois materialism. Yet the strategy of the rebellion in European high culture had certain distinctive characteristics that may help us to understand the American experience.

A crude way of putting the matter is to say that cultural discontent among European intellectuals was more drastic. American intellectuals did not—any more than the American painters of the day—go in for strong colors. One cannot imagine among them a Vincent Van Gogh or a Georges Sorel. Hardly anyone in America directly and belligerently assailed conventional standards of morality. American intellectuals did not, like so many Europeans, feel profoundly alienated from their own society and culture. James, Wright, and Turner conceived of themselves as revitalizing values rooted in American life. Feeling that great reserves of energy lay all around them, they did not look so far afield as those Europeans who turned to primitive myth or to the international proletariat. Nor did they look so far beneath the surface as those Europeans who plunged into the depths of the private self.

Nothing seems more striking in comparative terms than the absence in the United States of the radical subjectivity that was entering European thought. In European literature the symbolists were creating an art of equivocality, distortion, and illusion. In philosophy the Bergsonian doctrine of intuition and the Nietzschean celebration of the Dionysian ego were beginning to be heard. In psychology Freud was probing the strange world of dreams. In history the leading German theoreticians were declaring their independence from scientific laws and insisting on the subjective basis of historical knowledge. In all these fields, European intellectuals were rending the fabric of external reality and discovering truth in the depths of subjective, personal experience. In America, on the other hand, literature remained predominantly realistic, philosophy empirical, psychology behav-

ioral, history scientific. Yet on both continents intellectuals were seeking liberation from closed systems and formalistic abstractions.

The difference may be explained largely in terms of contrasting environments. America was a big country with a relatively fluid rather than a relatively stable society. Here the restless intellectual reached outward to the range, flux, and variety of life around him. In Europe he was more likely to reach inward to the intense and often mystical feelings within himself. Americans rebelled by extending the breadth of experience, Europeans by plumbing its depths. For Americans liberation meant permissiveness, maneuverability, multiplication of the individual's relationships with the world outside himself. Accordingly, James celebrated multiplicity and constructed an essentially eclectic philosophy. Wright swept away confining walls and opened up fluid space. Turner widened the breadth of history in order to interrelate political, social, economic, and geographical changes.

Unready for the heightened subjectivity of European thought, American intellectuals did not engage in the accompanying criticism of scientific ideas. In Europe objective reality lost some of its authority. Americans, however, resisted sharp segregation between various levels and types of thought: between facts and values, intellect and intuition, the scientific and the supra-scientific. "Something there is that doesn't love a wall," an American poet declared some years later; and the chief American philosophers—James, Dewey, and Peirce—wanted to do away with walls separating subjective values from objective facts. For Americans the external world retained a promise of ultimate goodness and harmony.

Consequently, the broad and various reaches of nature provided the expansive Americans of the 1890's not only with the vitality they sought but also with a spacious alternative to the European self-consciousness they shunned. A genteel literary critic of the 1890's offers us a final summation of the intellectual strategy that—for better or worse—prevailed:
nothing breeds doubt and despair so quickly as a constant and feverish self-consciousness, with inability to look at life and the world apart from our own interests, emotions, and temperament. This is, in an exceptional degree, an epoch of morbid egoism, of exaggerated and excessive self-consciousness; an egoism which does not always breed vanity, but which confirms the tendency to measure everything by its value to us, and to decide every question on the basis of our personal relation to it. It is always unwise to generalize too broadly and freely about contemporary conditions, but there are many facts to bear out the statement that at no previous period in the history of the world have so many men and women been keenly and painfully self-conscious; never a time when it has been so difficult to look at things broadly and objectively.

From this heated atmosphere and from these representations of disease, put forth as reproductions of normal life, we fly to Nature, and are led away from all thought of ourselves. We escape out of individual into universal life; we bathe in the healing waters of an illimitable ocean of vitality. . . . To drain into ourselves the rivulets of power which flow through Nature, art, and experience, we must hold ourselves open on all sides; we must empty ourselves of ourselves in order to make room for the truth and power which come to us through knowledge and action; we must lose our abnormal self-consciousness in rich and free relations with the universal life around us.55

In keeping with his own gentility, Hamilton Wright Mabie softened the outreaching strategy of American culture. For him and for many other Americans it meant escape. It was a flight from travail, from complexity, from the terrors of self-awareness. Yet the great restlessness that seized the nations of the West in the nineties did not, even in America, dissipate itself in dreams of natural harmony. The psychic turbulence unloosed at that time continued to beat upon us in the twentieth century, and it has gradually involved Americans as well as Europeans in a deeper confrontation of themselves.

The Concept of Nature

by Albert William Levi

The intuitions of poets and the underpinnings of literary life reflect the perturbations of mind which are a consequence of revolutions and transformations in philosophic thought. In 1798 Wordsworth in the “Lines Composed A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey” crystallized a view of nature which was not only an implicit attack upon the cosmology of the eighteenth century, but was an earnest of that proto-romanticism which was to govern the mind of Europe for the next forty years.

For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity,
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue. And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man: