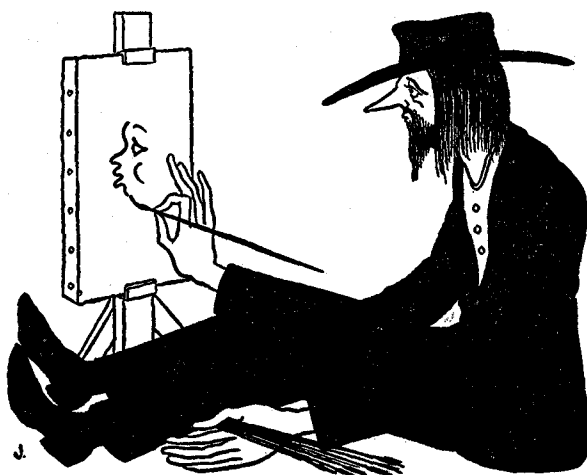

THE BOHEMIAN CAPTIVITY

Greenwich Village — Burial Ground of the Arts

BY THOMAS F. HEALY



IN SPEAKING of Greenwich Village one may revert to the old witticism that it is not so much a locality as it is a state of mind. Above the mere principle of place it stands for a theory and propagates an attitude toward life that may be summed up in the word Bohemianism. It has to-day, thanks to the depression, more disciples than ever, and it still draws through Washington Square Arch its quota of the youth of the land, most of them lured hither by rumors of its glamour and gaiety, all heirs to the traditional misconception, yet prevalent in the hinterland, that the Village is the proving ground of the imaginative arts in America. It is more of a burial ground than anything else.

Some indeed come, as the writer himself came ten years ago, in the hope of finding here a fellowship bound in the inward unity of genuine artistic ideals, a nucleus of creative souls forging new swords of light on the traditional anvil to wield against a drab and dark world. They are soon disillusioned. For quite the contrary, the Village is a place of disparate small groups, of precious little arty cliques and æsthetic cults, mutually jealous and exclusive of one another, endlessly frittering away their energies from morning to night in talk about

Art (*sic*), to whom Bohemianism, instead of being a dubious stage in the artist's career, has now come to mean a virtual way of life, a world, an end in itself.

THE FERTILE GERM

THE VILLAGE is at once the fountainhead and apotheosis of the Bohemian spirit in art in America. It began as an American Latin Quarter, for Bohemianism here was an offshoot of the French brand, which was itself the mass degradation of the minority movement inaugurated by the French Romantics in 1830 against official tyranny in government and art. Great men of the Continent backed that movement to uphold the standards of intellectual aristocracy. One could scarcely call them Bohemians, using the word in the current connotation to which it has been degraded. But every movement draws in its wake undesirable apostles who by stretching the "revolutionary" idea to extremes break the bounds of historical necessity. Like most of the other human movements this one, too, got out of hand and resulted in chaos.

One cannot discuss Bohemianism without mentioning Henri Murger's book, *Scènes de la Vie de Bobême*, the unfortunate publication of which came hard on the heels of the Romantic Movement. It was a most readable novel, romanticizing the lives of certain lesser artists of the Quarter and extolling the *grisette* for her willingness to share the struggling artist's bed and board. Widely read and acclaimed, it brought a new generation, *boi polloi* of art, to Paris, besides swelling the rabble of similar movements in England and America. This was the novel that prompted Whistler, who said he "loved the book," to don stranger clothes than ever, to become Bohemian, and to live in a garret in "poverty" (though he received an allowance of \$350 a year, then in France a princely sum).

Many of the more genuine artists, however, had the intelligence to see the new spirit in its germ. They protested against it but in vain. The movement grew, and they disassociated themselves from it.

Murger's book was a blow at art. Of course beneath any extraneous phenomenon the movement was bound to come, in that it was a revolt of the human spirit against the deification of work; that is, against the purely economic type of work, devoid of any nobility in its own nature and deriving its only dignity from the necessity it served — work of a merely quantitative character gauged by hours and money. It was crushing the old poetic individual life to leave no place of esteem for the anti-economic types of endeavor as those of artistic creation or heroism or holiness. It was the full triumph of the Reformation man, who first peered with crooked eyes over the world from the oozy soil of the Netherlands, to reach in America his highest stature and to nail life to the barn door of merely practical virtue. The three words of light on his lips were, "Time is money" — to-day the magic nostrum of America.

It was against this spirit that the great artists ranged themselves, against what was to them the triumph of "middle-classiness" and its uninspired outlook on life. They were men like Ibsen, Goethe, Byron, Nietzsche, and Dostoyevsky. But likewise did the hordes of incompetents who joined the movement and flocked to the artistic centers of their respective countries assume this attitude of hauteur towards the bourgeoisie, and the majority of them, having no gifts of work to substantiate their superiority, made a cult of their hauteur — the smaller the fry the more vehement and obvious the protest. So Bohemianism came to burgeoning and came generally to be accepted as a prerequisite in every artistic career. Thousands mistaking fancies for vocations jumped on the band wagon and went in for Art in a big way. Barren of any definitive artistic beliefs, they affected eccentricities and, devoid of moral courage, they sidestepped the onus of the hard, heroic toils in which genuine men labor. The whole content of the Bohemian philosophy came to mean unconventionality, and Art became the alibi for all manner of crazy conceits and outlandish idiosyncrasies.

At first this sort of artist was regarded as a purely psychological type, but he remains to-day the socially predominant type in Bohemia — the disheveled dilettante.

SPREAD OF THE PLAGUE

BOHEMIANISM began at once to defile those national bents deepened by the emotions of the race and conducive to authentic works; it turned them to anti-social channels. Like patriotism itself it became in many cases the final refuge of scoundrels and wastrels. However, these could not in Europe wholly destroy the lofty lineage of art and ancient genealogy of culture. The great tradition remained, and, if begrimed with the many hands of knaves and dolts, it still served to guide the true artist to genuine endeavor. In America the tragedy was deeper because she was cut off from Europe; she had no formed or well-defined autochthonous tradition of her own or, rather, had not yet come to be so consciously sensible of it that it inspired or molded her art forms. Then there was the Puritan who had cast out the rich pageantry of church and state and lived in a world whose beauty was but an entanglement about his feet, who tried to shape the age to his image. There were no hymns to love and beauty in his religion, which destroyed the final vestiges of the happy paganism preserved in Europe by Catholicity as essential to the artistic expression of a free people.

Attempts at American art were therefore in most cases grafted on the French stem, and the result was an emasculated art, a thing of fads and whimsies lacking in any real essence or native purport, an art that was neither fish nor fowl nor good red herring. One may still see some specimens of this at a rather well-known artists' exhibit held annually at a New York hotel. Virtually all of the pictures displayed come from Greenwich Village. Some of them are good, but the majority are worthless and trivial with small excuse for being shown. But good and bad are placed side by side and thrust at a gaping, idolatrous public in that manner. There is evident no attempt to rank creations in their proper order of merit, and there seems to be no norm of criticism. There is a complete lack of the assessive faculty which guards the objective hierarchy of values.

The same may be said of the literature

hatched in Bohemia. Like painting it is "self-expression," but it expresses nothing but the unreality of the lives of the writers. A Bohemian is at present engaged in compiling out of the depths of his being (or non-being) a book which incidentally will be without any punctuation marks and in which many of the words will be written upside down. He belongs to a club which in meeting for luncheon every week begins the meal with the dessert and eats backwards to the soup. This is not even new, for one of Modigliani's cronies in Paris went in for the same stunt. It is from such sources, however, that originality in Art springs in this Bohemia. It is indeed original in the pathological sense, like the bearded lady in the Broadway side show, but it has no value. This striving for "newness" in Art in Bohemia has in most cases meant a complete annihilation of the artistic heritage and a perversion of all normal artistic instincts. The peril lies in the possibility of opening the door to every sort of freak; and the biggest fool, given a good press agent, might well become our favorite artist or author.

The World War served but to spread the Bohemian plague in America. Its spiritual shock brought another hosting of incompetents from the discontented and disrupted hinterland. On top of this came Prohibition, which brought the Village to a new ascendancy — the chief reason being its excessive proportion of the cheaper sort of speakeasies. It was the custom for a clique of artists to patronize one speakeasy, because their presence drew the more conventional patronage, and the proprietor recognized their drawing power with free drinks. Then with a full house a rendition of *Cynara* or the like was always good for several drinks of bad gin or *grappa*, purchased for the artists by the bourgeoisie, whom they despised. Bohemia became the mecca for droves of out-of-town visitors, come to see "Greenwich Village" and to supplicate bangles of beauty with their bad booze. Paul Morand, the French critic, who did the Village in one night, summed it up in his book, *New York*:

Everything's fake in Greenwich Village — fake cabarets, fake newspaper men, fake poverty, fake genius. "Olde Tyme Innes" and peasant arts sprout at every street corner. A few dancing places, frequented pretty late at night, have an air of being disreputable which they do not justify. In the recesses of the cot-

tage-cabarets, over which a liquid gilt has been smeared to give them an air of antiquity, people get clandestine bottles of California Chianti, and only a college freshman out for the night imagines it to be wine. The Village is false.

In such sordid dives the majority of Village artists hold forth and, having no recognized voice in paint or print, they talk and declaim about Art. That is their way of life. Art in this Bohemia is a social inspiration and infers social gatherings or as a better word has it, contact. The artist in America must have it as well as the salesman, it seems. On the face of it there is common sense in the meetings of artists to advise and encourage one another, but if these run into a ceaseless café chattering about Art, that is another matter, especially as regards the belief that it helps to inspire other art — all this, be it understood, in frowzy dumps whose atmospheres pollute any decent creative sensibilities.

Most of the Village artists live their days through an endless array of futile arguments offered in vanity and arrogance and they become consequently persons of no deliberate thought at all. Some of them still borrow the bad habits of other Bohemians, of such as Wilde and Whistler; some even take on nervous disorders or chronic illnesses as a further aid and alibi for the displays of temperament that have come to be associated with the artist in Bohemia. The late Marcel Proust made this sort of thing popular; and to belong to the *cognoscenti* here it was for some years necessary to have read all his dreary length of novels. There are also the "artistic and philosophical suicides" which occur here, mostly however via the plebeian gas route; and in some cases death indeed seems a kinder alternative than the moronia to which impotence in Bohemia usually leads. Of course the mistress cult still prevails here. Many women remain avid to emulate Kiki or Modigliani's mistress, the Kidney Bean, and it is curious how in so many cases they fall for the weakest types of artists, who find it easier to go about with them to drink and talk about Art than to work. It must be admitted that most of these women are not great catches by any means, and they usually get left in the end. Cohabitation remains the most futile of the French fallacies transplanted here; it never has given anything to art.

Even the serious artist stands a good chance of being contaminated with this Bohemian spirit, and many have been known of that sort, who came here to work only finally to contract the toxin, succumb to the cultus, and lose their identity by remaining here. Bohemia is built on human frailty, and the odds are rather heavy against the average youth who enters it, because he usually adopts its psychology. It forms also a convenient channel for indolence and the pursuit of pleasure under guise of Art. And it has since the War particularly become the haven for an influx of misfits, who form part of the Village picture to-day and whose activities may be followed with more immunity in Bohemia than elsewhere.

THE DREADFUL INFECTION

A WRITER recently commended the Village for its "spirit of youth and *joie de vivre*." That is a surface view. It is a spirit which allows no growth or advancement toward maturity; and one finds its *joie de vivre* to be but a shoddy mask over sadness and defeat. One may expect an artistic colony to hold a certain youthful devil-may-care and happy-go-lucky attitude toward life, and the true artist has a gaiety that enables him to face hardships in good heart and to meet the vicissitudes of life without dishonor. The joys of the Village leave small room for such an attitude. The scores upon scores of meetings and roisterings held here nightly are primarily the means for escaping the terrors of loneliness and the drab monotony of artistic lives as they are ordered here. For in truth Bohemianism has transformed these children of Art into stereotypes more uniformly dismal than the bourgeoisie themselves; there is perhaps more hope for the intellectual regeneration of the latter.

The hosts of artists in the American Bohemia comprise mostly trivial persons. According to the editor of one of the Village journals, "about 3,000 artists (painters) and 2,500 writers live here, the majority of whom are working under all sorts of conditions." It is a cause for wonder why no great art has sprung from all this activity. What is produced seems in large part to be a boundless spillover of rather capricious and idiotic creations, loud with all the volubility of the uninspired. Incidentally, several journals have been of late founded in

the Village, and more are in process of being established to become the media for these creations; but excepting one or two magazines little of the matter produced in these papers holds any objective value, though all of it is added fuel for the Bohemian pestilence. One may frequently find in them articles and stories marked with incoherent nastiness and pictures in bad sense and bad taste. The latest fashion in artistic circles here derives its inspiration from the anti-capitalist propaganda evoked by the depression. Many artists are going communist and are trying to create that nameless horror called "proletarian art."

One hears much of the liberty of Bohemia. The Villager prides himself on his freedom; he boasts of it as one willing to die for his ideals in that respect. One sees no sign of such freedom in his works. The trouble is that the so-called freedom of Bohemianism has made its disciples the prisoners instead of the guardians of art, the helots of a hideous kingdom raised on the ruins of the great tradition of art. If artistic expression springs from a free, creative act of the spirit, the least it might infer in the artist is mental health, moral conduct, and a constant inward source of stimulus — none of which is held in any too great repute in the Village, because the Village still stresses its peculiar exemption from the orthodox canons of moral or religious restriction.

If any defense may be made for the artist as he lives in Bohemia to-day, it might run like this: It is false whether in praise or blame to isolate the Village from the country which recruits it and from which it receives the elements of whatever art it may be said to produce. Some artists claim that it is difficult to be greatly roused to imaginative activity in the United States to-day — difficult to be inspired by the spectacle of a national life daily yielding its freedom to ever-new and petty elaboration, organization, and mechanism; a national life ever shifting and on the run somewhere; a national life in which labor has made the business of men's lives a virtual desecration and furrowed their faces with the trivia of a false toil. What can the artist find in this sort of superficial existence, where the center of life seems transferred, misplaced to its periphery; where indeed the organic, hierarchical order of life itself seems destroyed? Must it come to the

question of how to save at all the innocence of good art in such a scene of expedient purposes; of systematic education, statistics, and rhetoric; of specialized activities; of temporary interests; and of current events? Will our will to wealth and well-being wipe out our will to genius? Under the ægis of the pleb will America become impervious to art? How may the artist mold a meaning from such a scene? How reforge the splendors and the everlasting loyalties? He finds no substantiation of the soul in the trivial and temporary which hem him in and encompass him around, imposed by an artificial life and by passing fads and orders. He is confounded by the external and declamatory voices raised about him that they may create gadgets and newspapers and tour-books — voices which are wholly destructive of the nobility of emotion that should be associated with the scenery and events of this native land, the thing that is America. Is American art expressing that “thing” called America to-day? A Frost may create a New England province; a Sandburg a Chicago dream; a Lewis a camera study of a hotel magnate — stray surface flashes to serve the current need. We await our Shakespeare, our Dante, our Goethe to define the loyalty that is America. There is no sense in the fatal alibi of our youth; it was years back that Oscar Wilde commented on America’s “profession of youthfulness as one of her oldest traditions.” The meaning of a country is found only in the depths of the mind, though one is given much to doubt that America has any meaning, when beneath her social, her economic, her psychological, and even her so-called ethical phenomena one looks in vain for any sign or symbol of an intellectual direction or spiritual significance for mankind.

LIFE FOR ART’S SAKE

AND THOUGH he is better off materially, the artist in America to-day is in sorrier case than his brother in Europe. If he heeds not the soothing, sirupy call of Hollywood and likewise refuses to be hired in the machine shops of commercial art, he too readily turns to Bohemia as the only place left him. There in a place apart he dreams but does not create. Art has for him now lost its social function; he is cut off. Unwilling to bear burdens that are not his or to kotow to the orders of servile lips, he sits

aloof with his kind in contemplative indolence, playing with fragile and unsubstantial things. He has forgotten the best way out under the circumstances — to stay in Keokuk, where despite the billboards he would find some natural beauties close to his heart where men have not yet gone.

Thus the artist’s life in Bohemia like the lives of most of his compatriots in business runs out as merely an external activity, a cerebral functioning; to such extent does the pressure of the world without affect him. He gets a set of painting tools or of writing materials and becomes an American creative machine. Some evidence of this was seen recently when in opening offices to register the unemployed the Civil Works Administration was virtually stampeded by droves of Village artists applying for work in painting posters and the like for the Government. All of them were willing to be hired by the state in tasks inaugurated and directed by the state; all were eager to join the raucous chorus the state has in its pay. “Made work” for Bohemia! One could not help feeling there was a time before the era of our official art and stock-exchange values when such a spectacle would have drawn forth immortal scorn.

Bohemia somehow will go on producing Art, but it will continue to mold little to offer to American civilization. What great art can flourish in a colony or center composed in the main of persons each flaunting his own brand of particular soullessness? The revolt against the deification of work has here resulted in the opposite extreme, the deification of Art — not art for art’s sake but life itself for Art’s sake. Life of course constantly refuses such a separation, a heresy, but the Village Bohemian does not realize it. He continues with his cliques and cults all moving in their own little eddies, lost in their own labyrinths, wandering in blind alleys, all going round in the same spot.

The frivolities of Bohemia are substituted to cover up the void of artistic incompetency, for even in the Village nature abhors a vacuum. And yet the great majority of artists here remain supreme egotists; they will loudly protest that they are artists and merit a place in the band wagon of art, as if to insist they were not born to be plowhands or toilet-goods salesmen. They lack utterly the humility of the true art-

ist. One like Æschylus, who said he but served crumbs from the banquet of Homer, would have no place in this Bohemia. And day by day their vocations become less and less inevitable; they soon begin to play at art which is now no longer a vital function but an insincere gesture, arty faking.

They pound out compositions — non-sensical distortions of the messy, self-pitying type — that have no reason for existence outside that of “self-expression,” shouting their little griefs and grudges. In paint they daub over filched styles and bootless theories, covered with the cast of their own unreality and based on the purely spurious abstractions of art begot by Dadaism and surrealism. They discuss Gertrude Stein. In a number of cases their creations are exhibited and marketed by incompetents themselves, who, having failed at creating, have gone in for directing and managing the latent talent of Bohemia in little schools they have set up. One might imagine that from their poverty (and the majority are poor) would spring something genuine. But they remain just poor people who have evoked from their penury no mood or meaning or philosophy of life. They seem to have no definitive program, no goal, no ideal toward which to function; they have no vision, and for all they seem to be able to do about it the people can perish. Many would indeed like to be “great artists”; one hears the wish in their talk but does not see it in their works, and it certainly has never entered their prayers or lighted them through the holy dark of any beautiful or bitter reverie or serious contemplation.

One does not include those few artists who, though living in Bohemia, remain aloof from all this, nor those who, if they have entered it, have left it in time to escape its virus. They may not be up with the latest fashion in Art in Bohemia, but among them are real workers. They are not as modernistic perhaps as most of the Village artists, but theirs is the more serious duty of what may be modern art — the forging of something genuine out of the essential life of their own times. Not having succumbed to the Bohemian cultus, they are able to uphold the standards of true art while throwing out certain inherited styles and systems of expression and discarding accretions that formed detritus on

the clear, running stream of the tradition. They are the real apostles of modern art. The tragedy remains, however: Bohemia has come to be regarded as the sort of place, and Bohemianism as the sort of life that must now hand out Art to the rest of the country, that must command obeisance from so much of our youth that comes here to be burnt out before it produces anything; it has come to be thought that any possible mark of merit must first be pulped through the mills of Bohemia into a nameless grist for our appreciation. And for this situation our critics are as much to blame as our artists.

THE STAGE OF SENILE DECAY

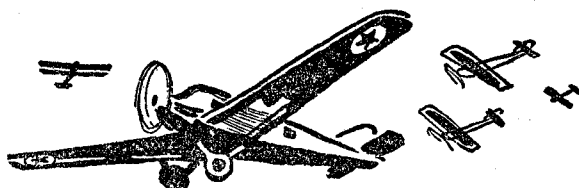
YET youth continues to come here, to join these ranks of the doomed and abandoned apostles of Art. In fine it is still very much the fashion to be of the “lost” in Bohemia, and many artists here even to this late day regard themselves as the élite of the “lost generation,” which blamed on the World War its attitude of disillusion. Whatever may be said of that generation outside Bohemia (and the whole spectacle of the spread of such a false attitude toward life appalls one) one is inclined to feel that the artists here at one of the great crises in human history played false to their vocations and to the artistic mission deposited in their keeping. They are now paying the penalty imposed in retribution for such dereliction of duty. Life has left them flat; they have lost the artistic will; the Muses have forsaken them. To Bohemia they fled and under its glamour they sought to hide from their destiny.

The future of America's Bohemia looks worse to-day than ever. Besides the influx of youth there is also a disemboing of many commercial people, salesmen, and traders who have lost their jobs or have been wiped out because of the depression. Many of these are also going in for “self-expression”: to “sculpt,” to paint, to write, as well as to augment the plague of poets already abounding here — all to enlist in the Bohemian army of the Great Misunderstood.

Meanwhile Greenwich Village has long outlived its era of running American art into the ditch. It remains far and away the stalest joke in the national scene. It is America's greatest challenge to common sense.

A WEST-POINTER LOOKS AT RUSSIA

BY CHARLES W. THAYER



Drawings from Soviet schoolbooks

Courtesy of Amniga Corporation

"RUSSIA IS and has been collapsed for the past fifteen years," the retired colonel had told me not long ago. "Those Russians are mad; they don't know what they're doing or what they want to do."

His words came back to me suddenly as the decrepit old Russian plane ("her last trip," the pilot had told me comfortingly as we left Koenigsberg) struck Soviet soil and bounced back high into the air, followed by brown tongues of muddy water. The third leak in the radiator during our two-day journey from Koenigsberg had once more covered the windshield with dirt so that the pilot was unable to see a thing. Eventually we settled down and taxied up to a dilapidated wooden shack — Leningrad's airdrome. For one or two minutes I wondered if the colonel hadn't been right after all.

LENINGRAD AND TARKHOFKA

LENINGRAD — huge, columned public buildings, great squares where one can still feel the presence of those angry mobs of February and November, 1917. Rainy, muddy, drab perhaps, but still aristocratic, aloof, and proud.

In the hands of our guides, the city was spread before us and interpreted: "That is the former palace of Prince —. It used to house one family; now fifty families live in it comfortably. . . . Those are the new workers' quarters. Over there you can see the old wooden shacks they used to live in. Now each family has three rooms and a bath. . . . This was formerly a church; now it is a public library."

In desperation we slipped away from our guides and, seated in a third-class railway carriage, rode out into the country. A little boy, black with dirt, his ragged clothes tied about him with bits of string, shuffled into the car and for ten minutes wailed forth an endless, and to us, meaningless ballad. When he had finished, all the occupants of the car, peasants hidden behind heaps of bags, boxes, and milk pails, dug down into their pockets and from small leather bags drew out coppers. With a polite, businesslike "spasibo" the beggar went on his way. A moment later the same tune was to be heard from the next car. . . .

Tarkhofka is a little town on the Finnish Bay, opposite the Kronstadt Forts, formerly a favorite summer resort for wealthy St. Petersburgers, now the year-round resort of deserving workers from Leningrad who may come and spend a few days in one of the three large "Rest Homes," reading, gossiping, or tramping about the muddy lanes, watching the trains from Leningrad to Finland pass down the center street. Nearby is a large pine forest, planted, it is said, by Peter the First for lumber for his fleets. Bearded peasants chop and saw and sing and drive their clumsy carts back and forth from the railroad to the forest.

We had gone to look for the former home of now-exiled Russians. With the aid of a map we soon found it and boldly pounded on the door. Though footsteps inside warned us the house was not empty, no one paid us any attention. We walked in. Not ten feet from the door a boy was repairing the floor. He grunted some unintelligible Russian and went on with his work. Apparently foreigners might make themselves at home at their pleasure. Guides would have been glad to point out that this house, formerly occupied by one family, is now the home of four.