

# Is America Europe?

SOME years ago when I was editing a magazine called *The Seven Arts*, I was confronted by an attitude which it hardly seems proper to mention now. That was before the war. And at that time it seemed insulting to many people to speak of America as being spiritually colonial. Now there are men ready to fling a glove in your face if you say there is such a thing as Americanism.

I think particularly of one of the editors of a highly literary importing magazine. This young man pooh-poohs the idea of an American national art. America, he says, is a province of Europe. We are Europeans who have moved next door. We simply veneer our Europeanism with a little American slang, Indian names, local color, and think we are another civilization.

Sandburg is a Swede, Whitman was Dutch-English . . .

Which explains why we imitate the imported art. Nay, more, why our young men and young women take up residence in London, Paris and Rome. And what is even more important, why every new art movement in Europe is hailed as a harbinger and herald of a new age of art, instead of the phosphorescence and sultry explosions of decay.

Europe is weary. That booming, organ-sounding structure of Christ Church, had its Gothic bloom; until the very Devil it had suppressed whispered in its ear and tempted it with the new Tree of Knowledge. Science and Art were its Anti-Christ, its Nietzschean Samsons shaking the great pillars until there came the crash of the Great War. That was the beginning of disintegration. The arts showed it. Painting ran headlong into Cubism and literature into Expressionism. Why? To end the spiritual demolition. Raze it to the ground, destroy it utterly, so orders the soul of Europe. It is right. The new Europe, whose cradle may be Russia, must have a clear air and room, plenty of room.

When I was in London I saw in the midst of a crowded and speedy gutter a lonely house which blocked traffic. I asked Lansbury why it wasn't pulled down. "Special grant of Parliament three hundred years ago; and now Parliament is too busy to bother repealing a little act like that." That is much of Europe. The traffic is blocked by tradition. There must be demolition. Many things believed in, many things that were good, have turned evil in the hour of destruction. For all these things are a prison for the soul of Europe, in need of an age beyond Christianity.

It was clear-sighted then of T. S. Eliot to say of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, "It does not mark the

beginning of a new era, but the end of an old."

Very well. Then what is the matter with T. S. Eliot? Why is he world-weary? Why is he in a Waste Land? What ails our Cubistic Waldo Frank? Why does the Freeman depend on the Oxford Dictionary? Why doesn't the Dial export as well as import? Why is Anderson a post-Russian grown inarticulate and making his characters go naked in small town streets? Why is Gertrude Stein?

These people are Americans. What right has an American to be world-weary?

My son, who is sixteen, read Wassermann and became world-weary just long enough to turn out a little Wassermannian novel. But he was too young. He didn't know the trick of holding the pose. He has come out of it.

Do we really dare to maintain that this country isn't any different from Europe? I don't mean better, or even worse; I mean different. Why, even Germany is different from France, and they have the same boundary line. Russia and England are both a part of Europe, and they are psychologically poles apart. Will any one maintain that a hundred million people, severed from Europe by an ocean, and built up out of a pioneer environment, which furnished a unique experience for white men, is not even more different from Europe, than one European nation from another? Rubbish! We are a new people . . .

I watched two European psychologists, one of them great, the other excellent, react to America. They knew Europeans. They had psycho-analyzed many. They had traveled; they were cultivated. The excellent one said, "You have a young libido. It is the age of adolescence. Anything is possible. Greatness, destruction. It intoxicates me. Such energy! It is like Niagara pouring out!" The other one felt himself renewed. He made reservations. He said, "The mind of Europe is deep; that of America, expansive." But he thought of moving over here, and beginning anew.

It is true. We are not deep; we *are* dynamic. We are not wise with the wisdom of age; but there is also a wisdom of youth. And we are actually (terrible fact to the colonials) without spiritual traditions. Where are those traditions? The Red Men destroyed some of them. Naked living in new lands destroyed others. Every wave of immigration broke one tradition against another. We have lip-service traditions, but none of the soul. One must wear a mask in this country in order to get the idea of community of spirit. Ku Kluxism is a miserable failure to make Americans of them all; that is, Americans of tradition.

Where is the Old South? Where old New

England? Where is aristocratic old New York? Where even is the pioneer tradition of California? Has it moved to the movies in Hollywood? Scarcely.

And where is Christianity? We boom it up. We start Forward movements. We have Y drives. We put Billy Sunday on the trail. Nothing works. Christianity in America has no depth. It has become, not a religion, but a system of behavior and of getting on.

Where a whole people feels it necessary to adopt a uniform exterior, it is plain enough that this is to cover the isolation each one feels. There are too many seeds of difference, of individualism. That is why Whitman could say, "I sing the word En Masse; and I sing the Individual." "Produce Great Persons, the rest follows."

But I am not trying to defend America. It is young; it is half barbarous; it is collectively servile; it is anything you want. But it is not Europe. It is not old. It is not weary. It is

not poor. It is not mortised in tradition. It has not had its soul shattered by war. It is not Christ or Satan. It is nothing, and everything.

If America wants great art, it had best look into the seeds grown on this soil. Out of this soil sprang Leaves of Grass, and this grass is fresh and green and covers a continent. It is the fodder for our artists. We need no period of demolition: no Nietzsche, no James Joyce, no Cubists. When we migrated over the job was done. We need, not to break a tradition, but to live out its great beginnings.

Are we then to be national and resist foreign influence? That would be ridiculous, as well as impossible. When Goethe was young the German artists cut themselves off from French spiritual domination, and produced a German literature. Every European influence is in it; yet it is German because they turned to their task. And that is all we need to have our great period of the arts.

JAMES OPPENHEIM.

## Gibbon and the Movies

SIMEON STRUNSKY once wrote of his friend, Professor William P. Jones, who danced the whole of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* in a series of matinées extending over two weeks. The first two volumes were danced in slow time. But with the story of the barbaric invasions in the third volume, Professor Jones's interpretation took on a fury that was almost bacchantic. The sack of Rome was pictured in a tempest of somersaults. "A certain obscure passage in the life of Attila the Hun, which had long puzzled the scholars, was for the first time made clear to the average man when Professor Jones, standing on one foot, whirled round rapidly in one direction for five minutes, and then, instantly reversing himself, spun round for ten minutes in the opposite direction."

Professor Jones danced it, but Gibbon calls for different treatment, calls, as no other, for the motion picture. I want to meet David Wark Griffith and talk Gibbon with him. A dozen women are waiting, headed by Zenobia, and many men and happenings. These events, these persons, exist in source books, and have been described by many writers. It is in the color, the panoply, the music, of their presentation that the quality of Gibbon shows itself. In the turn of difference lies all the richness of his book. Hear the drip and splash of water on marble and silver in the baths of Diocletian and Caracalla:

"The Egyptian granite was beautifully encrusted with the precious green marble of Numidia; the perpetual stream of hot water was poured into the capacious basins, through so many wide mouths

of bright and massy silver; and the meanest Roman could purchase with a small copper coin, the daily enjoyment of a scene of pomp and luxury, which might excite the envy of the Kings of Asia."

Feel the wind blow on a sunny day round the son of Constantine:

"In a time of profound peace, he was encompassed by the glittering arms of the numerous squadrons of his guards and cuirassiers."

And after fourteen hundred years, this gift to Nushirvan from the King of India is still fragrant:

"Ten quintals of the wood of aloes, a maid seven cubits in height, and a carpet softer than silk, the skin, as it was reported, of an extraordinary serpent."

It is precisely in this difference that Gibbon needs rendering by some medium that can transfer the vibration. Such a sentence quivers to be released from the page to the screen as this:

"They (the Huns) advanced, by a secret path, along the shores of the Caspian Sea; traversed the snowy mountains of Armenia; passed the Tigris, the Euphrates, and the Halys; recruited their weary cavalry with the generous breed of Cappadocian horses; occupied the hilly country of Cilicia, and disturbed the festal songs and dances of the citizens of Antioch. Egypt trembled at their approach; and the monks and pilgrims of the Holy Land prepared to escape their fury by a speedy embarkation."

Gibbon was aware of the nature of his material and of his own method of picture-making. He pauses, for instance, in his Persian chapters, to speak of "the moving picture of the dynasties of the East." Galloping pursuit, stately proces-