THREE

AN AMERICAN ANGLE OF VISION, PART 2

When a way of thinking is deeply rooted in the soil and embodies the instincts or even the characteristic errors of a people, it has a value quite independent of its truth; it constitutes a phase of human life and can powerfully affect the intellectual drama in which it figures.

—George Santayana, Character and Opinion in the United States

In the case of America, to which Santayana’s text primarily refers, the stakes are somewhat higher than that of an intellectual drama. For better or worse, the American perspective is engaged with other major cultures in formulating the dominant metaphors for world culture. As with all massive cultural formulations, we find in America the perils and fruits of original attitudes not institutionalized elsewhere. Having already sketched some of the historical and methodological factors pertinent to the analysis of American culture, we turn now to the major philosophical assumptions and implications of this tradition. Naturally, there can be no exhaustive treatment here of any of these issues; we wish rather to emphasize the confusion that frequently exists between the analysis of American philosophy and the philosophical analysis of American culture. Categories and persuasions often taken to be characteristic of the former are actually found to be broadly based attitudes of the culture at large.

During the classical phase of American philosophy, as well as in the subsequent work of Dewey, the culture and its philosophical tradition shared basic concerns and methods of articulation. The studied neglect of the American philosophical tradition by all but a handful of contemporary American thinkers cuts us off, then, not simply from a philosophical option, but from the articulation of basic culture categories. Philosophy in America has made tremendous strides in a professional and technical way; but with rare exceptions, it has failed to address itself to the exigencies of the culture in a language commensurate with the way in which the culture understands itself. A major reason for this is the increased sophistication of philosophical discourse, which renders the work of Edwards, Emerson, James, and even Dewey inadequate and infelicitous in expression.

What is not adequately realized, however, is the fact that these thinkers, among others, have their hands on a large set of basic, even primitive, reconstitutions of the way in which men structure inquiry, of the values they seek, and a fortiori of the role of philosophy. These concerns and their imaginative, though admittedly often vague, versions are indigenous to a culture which was attempting, within the ever-present framework of Western European civilization, to work out what Emerson plaintively called “an original relation to the universe.” While not always explicit, this theme is basic to American thinkers, at least until World War I. In the long run, when one considers that it involves such questions as the meaning of nature, time, experience, and the experiential attitude, this cultural development should prove to be more important than the various responses given by individual philosophers. Granted that we cannot nostalgically return to the alleged “Golden Age” of American philosophy, it remains that the questions which bound those thinkers to their culture are still with us, and, as with all important questions, are badly in need of ever-renewed philosophical analysis. The remarks which follow are an attempt to reopen some of these questions from the perspective of philosophy, always recalling their broader cultural significance.

The Ambiguity of the Spiritual Pilgrimage

In speaking of the American people during their formative years, Sidney Mead opens up the question that should increasingly occupy us now
that we have obviously and irrevocably come to the end of any cultural and political separation from the pressing burdens of world culture. We are, in a word, faced anew with the problem of national identity.

Their great and obvious achievement was the mastery of a vast, stubborn, and oftentimes brutal continent. This is the “epic of America,” written with cosmic quill dipped in the blood, sweat, and tears of innumerable nameless little men and women and a few half-real, half-legendary heroes. . . . This is the mighty saga of the outward acts, told and retold until it has over-shadowed and suppressed the equally vital, but more somber, story of the inner experience. Americans have so presented to view and celebrated the external and material side of their pilgrims’ progress that they have tended to conceal even from themselves the inner, spiritual pilgrimage, with its more subtle dimensions and profound depths.

The question at issue has to do with the qualities of this “inner experience.” Are they distinctive enough to add dimension and insight to the human endeavor, as understood from a wider cultural perspective? Many would answer in the negative, seeing America as primarily a derivative culture with its strengths in the area of applied wisdom, both political and technological. There is a long tradition of such criticism, which the following remark of Walter Rathenau accurately sums up: “America has no soul and will not deserve to have one until it consents to plunge into the abyss of human sin and suffering.”

On the other hand, a case can be made for the original and seminal aspects of what Mead calls the “spiritual pilgrimage,” although the commentator must scrupulously avoid any chauvinism in his analysis. Speaking of our tendency to harbor a “cultural hypochondria,” particularly among intellectuals, Daniel Boorstin states:

The cure for our hypochondria is surely not chauvinism. That simply adds one real ill to the many unreal ills of which we already accuse ourselves. Waving a flag cannot cure inner uncertainty. One possibility, at least a little more fruitful, is to try to discover the peculiar virtues of our situation, the special character of our history, to try to judge ourselves by the potentialities of our own peculiar and magnificent continent. We may then discover that our virtues, like our ills, are actually peculiar to ourselves; that what seem to be inadequacies of our culture, if measured by European standards, are nothing but our differences and may even be virtues.

This is also the intent of John Kouwenhoven’s work in Made in America: The Arts in Modern Civilization. He writes in his preface that it is a book about America that assumes that the elements of creative vitality in American civilization matter a great deal, not only to Americans but to other people as well. It was written in the conviction that we cannot understand either the limitations or the achievements of that civilization if we continue to think of it solely as the product of Western European culture, modified by the geography and the climate of the New World.

In the final analysis, a continual reassessing of the significance of any cultural lineage is actually a function of a more broadly based human endeavor. And it is not so much a question as to whether the American tradition is radically different from other cultures but whether, in its emphases, concerns, and blindspots, as generated by its historical situation, such a tradition doesn’t offer options of a profound kind for the immediate human future. But the great obstacle to the articulation of such “inner qualities,” at least in the American context, is that they do not lend themselves to any consistent ideological formulation. At times, this is a sign of great cultural insight: a living dialectic between a series of equally humanizing alternatives. Witness, for example, this perceptive commentary on the twofold reaction of the American people to Lindbergh’s flight:

One view had it that America represented a brief escape from the course of history, an emergence into a new and open world, with the self-sufficient individual at its center. The other said that America represented a stage in historical evolution and that its fulfillment lay in the development of society. For one, the meaning of America lay in the past; for the other, in the future. For one, the American ideal was an escape from institutions, from the forms of society, and from limitations put upon the free individual; for the other, the American ideal was the elaboration of the complex institutions which made
modern society possible, an acceptance of the discipline of the machine and the achievement of the individual within a context of which he was only a part. The two views were contradictory but both were possible and both were present in the public’s reaction to Lindbergh’s flight.⁹

At other times, however, the articulation of our experiences remains trapped in a layer of self-deception that has often shrouded the way in which we understand and value ourselves. And this becomes a particularly crucial problem as our society relies increasingly on the activities of mass media for the development of self-understanding. In an incisive and exacerbating treatment of contemporary American culture, Daniel Boorstin shows how the externalized “image” of our experience has replaced the driving “ideal” that once motivated us:

Of all nations in the world, the United States was built in nobody’s image. It was the land of the unexpected, of unbounded hope, of ideals, of quest for an unknown perfection. It is all the more unfitting that we should offer ourselves in images. And all the more fitting that the images which we make wittingly or unwittingly to sell America to the world should come back to haunt and curse us. Perhaps, instead of announcing ourselves by our shadows and our idols, we would do better to share with others the quest which has been America.¹⁰

Can we offer another and more sanguine interpretation of the American penchant for mirroring itself in what often becomes a series of fake versions of deeply felt needs and ambitions? Perhaps this imaging of which Boorstin speaks is actually a degenerate form of a persistent symbolizing activity, an activity so necessary for a culture whose bounds are set out of events, often arbitrary, rather than as a response to deeply ingrained traditional mores.¹¹ Recalling the historical dimensions of the origin of America, particularly the influence on it of the origin of modernity and the end of the fully intelligible universe, we must realize that the correlative upheaval in Western values could manifest itself in a series of ways. In effect, given the American context, an underlying doctrine of an open nature and an anthropomorphic view of historical destiny can generate either a bold, ongoing symbolization of man's humanizing his environment, or a self-deceiving, pollyanna version of the world in which the major dimensions of human life are lived vicariously.

American culture is, of course, shot through with these alternative formulations and it is not adequately realized that they both proceed from the same originating qualities and concerns, intrinsic to its historical development. Those who oppose the tawdry and seductive dimensions of contemporary American culture by appealing to a nostalgic view of morally integral old America should be aware—as was Melville in his Confidence Man—that the very trust in experience, so indelibly and fruitfully American, was also the gateway to sham, corruption, and the ultimate dissolution of the very fabric of truth in human affairs.¹² Boorstin’s Image, or What Happened to the American Dream can be read as a modern version of Melville’s critique, and although not as philosophically incisive, it is ultimately more terrifying, for it draws on the wiles of the revolution in mass media, engendered by modern technology.

In order to come to grips with this basic ambiguity that surrounds the fundamental categories of self-understanding in American life, we have to analyze assumptions about “knowing,” which are actually the decisive factors in the framing of our fundamental value systems. In contemporary terms, we must begin to utilize the perspective of a “culture-epistemology.” It is true that, taken in its widest ramifications, this problem yields only to a thorough cultural history, but from the single perspective of philosophy, several critical dimensions are opened up. First, the emergence of an attitude toward knowledge, which results from the concrete historical situation and its entwining of a primitive environment with reflective and religiously wise settlers. This reflective primitivism ultimately forges a new doctrine of the relationship between nature and experience. Secondly, in the cultural and historical development of this novel setting, there is manifested a basic rephrasing of the fundamental relationship between thought and experience. To focus on these concerns is to come to grips with one major strand of those inner qualities central to American life; a strand which, when improperly assessed, leads to much that is shallow and dehumanizing on the American scene.


Reflective Primitivism: The Experience of Experience

In the American seventeenth century, philosophy was all but nonexistent; yet reflection was intense and self-conscious, primarily as a response to a pressing and omnipresent collective experience of a situation that was novel at every turn. And although that period in American history offered no articulation of the notion of experience as such, there was a correspondingly rich awareness of the significance of this situation over against the tradition of reflection. It was a period that dealt with profound philosophical themes without an articulated philosophical language. In effect, the American seventeenth century realized a broadly based cultural experience of experience. Santayana saw this clearly when he stated that "the country was new, but the race was tired, chastened and full of solemn memories."13 And in a different context, Dewey offers this revealing comparison:

In a certain sense the motif of American colonial history and of Defoe's Robinson Crusoe are the same. Both represent man who has achieved civilization, who has attained a certain maturity of thought, who has developed ideals and means of action, but is suddenly thrown back upon his own resources, having to cope with a raw and often hostile nature, and to regain success by sheer intelligence, energy and persistence of character.14

The most obvious and persistent import of this dialectic between the reflective tradition, as carried by the settlers, and the "new world" was the dominance of "experience" over any conceptual anticipation of "how things should be." The original situation had a clarity to it: "For summer being done, all things stand upon them with a wetherbeaten face; and the whole countie, full of woods & thickets, represented a wild & savage heiw. If they looked behind them, ther was the mighty ocean which they had passed, and was now as a maine barr & goulfe to separate them from all the civil parts of the world."15 Theory broke down here and "what one could build on this continent tended to become the criterion of what one ought to build here."16 A factor in this development may very well have been the inability of colonial Americans to initially duplicate the English version of cultural proprieties. Thus "the American, 'this new man,' was early conceived in relation to civilized Europe, if not to the savage frontier, as a primitive."17 This change in the spectrum of possibilities is engagingly caught in this excerpt from the Autobiography of Sam Houston: "And yet, this running wild among the Indians, sleeping on the ground, chasing wild game, living in the forests, and reading Homer's Iliad . . . seemed a very strange business, and people used to say that I would either be a great Indian chief, or die in a mad-house, or be governor of the State—for it was very certain that some dreadful thing would overtake me!"18

The cultural rejection by Europe fostered a sense of inferiority, but at the same time encouraged the colonial man to justify the richness of his own situation, making him open to new resources and ultimately to a different way of evaluating his needs and hopes. In this vein, Sanford states:

The chosen people of the American colonies increasingly looked upon their mission into the wilderness not merely as the continuation of something old but as the beginning of something new: they were to usher in the final stage of history. They had inherited a new world in a physical sense, and in order "to vindicate the most rigorous ideal of the Reformation" they felt it necessary, in Jonathan Edwards' words, "to begin a new world in a spiritual respect."19

The literature of early America—John Smith, the Puritans, and subsequent commentators on the continuing waves of settlement of "free land"—attests to this re-formation, and ultimately re-formulation, of basic value structures under the press of a new setting. The realization of this new setting was the dominant theme of the second-generation Puritans, of whom Perry Miller said: "Having failed to rivet the eyes of the world upon their city on a hill, they were left alone with America."20 The stage was set for a long series of interactions between theoretical structures and a primitive but malleable environment.

Nowhere is the epistemological implication of this persistently renewed interaction between reflection and environment more cogently phrased than in this passage from the Virginia Convention of 1830. A spokesman from West Virginia states:

But, sir, it is not the increase of population in the West which this gentleman ought to fear. It is the energy which the mountain breeze
and western habits import to those emigrants. They are regenerated, politically I mean, sir. They soon become working politicians; and the difference sir, between a talking and a working politician is immense. The Old Dominion has long been celebrated for producing great orators; the ablest metaphysicians in policy; men that can split hairs in all abstruse questions of political economy. But at home, or when they return from congress, they have negroes to fan them asleep. But a Pennsylvania, a New York, an Ohio, or a western Virginia statesman, though far inferior in logic, metaphysics, and rhetoric to an old Virginia statesman, has this advantage, that when he returns home he takes off his coat and takes hold of the plow. This gives him bone and muscle, sir, and preserves his republican principles pure and uncontaminated.  

It is not necessary to adopt Frederick Jackson Turner's often too optimistic view of the results of this exposure to the primitive situation. Rather, the persistent tension between ideas and experience should be the focal point, a tension that led Henry Nash Smith to write "Daniel Boone: Empire Builder or Philosopher of Primitivism?" This is the tension which is so clearly caught by Arthur K. Moore in his book on Kentucky:

Thus, the real frontiersman, obsessed with the garden myth, and behaving accordingly, became entangled in several versions of the same myth projected into the wilderness by the romantic imagination. Existing both as abstractions derived from European ideas about nature and man and as objective realities embodying the practical consequences of those ideas, Kentucky and the Kentuckian may be said to have mediated between Western civilization and the civilization which evolved in the American West.

What is crucial here, from the philosophical side, is that the press of environment as a decisive formulator of thought about the basic structures of the world became the outstanding characteristic of the American temperament. Pragmatism, so often regarded as the typically American philosophical product, is but a pale reflection of an ingrained attitude affirming the supremacy of experience over thought. It should be emphasized that this sense of the ineptness of anticipatory and defining concepts for managing experience was not only paramount in the early colonial period but was characteristic of the growth of American culture until the end of the nineteenth century. This is true not only for those who lived at the level of popular culture but also for those whose responsibility involved an articulation of general responses to the life-situation. The tension between beliefs held and experiences generated by incessantly novel circumstances, often of a physical kind, is a central theme in the thought of John Winthrop, Jonathan Edwards, Horace Bushnell, Emerson, Whitman, and, of course, James and Dewey, to say nothing of the major lines of political literature. For the most part, that tradition of American thought which we now regard as seminal, and even patriarchal, clearly sides with experience over reflection as the primary resource in formulating beliefs.

Contemporary America, however, has grave doubts about the present viability of this tradition, seeing it as no longer adequate to the complex ideational demands that confront us on every level. There is certainly a legitimate aspect to this contention, particularly if the meaning of experience remains fixed in the romantic metaphors of an earlier American version, or in the unimaginative formulations of British empiricism. But a careful analysis of the history of the notion of experience in American thought would show previous instances where worn and sterile terminology was successfully reconstituted.

In a very real sense each generation is faced with using the method of experience to develop a language that is consonant with the events and potentialities of its own situation. Such a transformation of the meaning of experience was accomplished by American philosophy at the end of the nineteenth century. Not only did this tradition, beginning with Chauncey Wright, effect a total reworking of the properly philosophical meaning of experience, but it also provided a large set of metaphors capable of being utilized at the level of popular culture. Some of these, as for example Dewey's suggestions about education, have been worked into the fabric of American life. But others, like James's views in the "Moral Equivalent of War" and Dewey's "Common Faith," have only now been put to the test of relevance. Still others, such as Royce's doctrine of community and James's insight into individual energies within a fully cosmic scheme, can still serve in the future reconstitution of experience along lines consistent with the still-active assumptions of the culture.
The point at issue is that the reflective primitivism so deeply imbedded within the culture is primarily an attitude, which more than in any other version of Western culture forces theoretical statements to respond more to the language of events than to its own mode of discourse. What must not be forgotten is the primal fact that the American tradition of which we speak, due to its aversion to any separate mode of discourse, cannot be adequately confronted simply by an epistemological critique of its shortcomings. Historically considered, this tradition was faced with an ever-shifting scene, characterized by widespread geographical, political, and spiritual upheavals. These crises were built into the very continuity of the culture, and it was thereby fitting that basic and even primitive categories of understanding were transformed. The meaning of the reflective experience is to point precisely to the fact that such a transformation had its basis in the willingness of the culture, over a sustained period of time, to listen to the informing character of experience.

This was a culture which knew what learning meant and, significantly, was heir to a great tradition of learning. But it was also able to accept the press of experience without submitting such an interaction to a conceptual framework. Such an openness to experience has been well documented in terms of the development of our political institutions, but it has not been adequately understood as a broader doctrine of inquiry. Efforts in this latter direction have too often separated the concern for experience from the reflective attitude, thereby failing to realize that in the American context reflection is not necessarily the bearer of traditional intellectual values. What is needed is an understanding of the tremendous effort within American culture to relocate the role of learning, and even to provide for a different method of generating basic principles—both seen as a function of the method of experience. In our immediate cultural situation, we would have to admit that speculation which is not linked to this persistent dialectic of reflection and experience does not obtain an adequate hearing, but the charge of anti-intellectualism against the culture is simply not to the point.

It might be said that the originality and power of the early formulation of American culture was inseparable from the mobility resulting from its almost continental status and from the ever-present contiguous "free land." Since such a situation no longer holds true, perhaps it would be wise to abandon the attitudes developed in that situation and make a fresh start. But any attempt to redirect American culture has to confront several deeply rooted metaphysical beliefs that are not easily gainsaid by traditional philosophical or theological terms. Furthermore, with events of staggering human importance manifesting themselves with unprecedented speed on the contemporary scene, in a world shrunken to geopolitical intimacy, there is neither time nor space to bring off a total, yet continuous, reconstitution of our entire lineage. Seemingly aware that we cannot effect such a momentous realignment of our tradition, and yet obviously dissatisfied with what seems to be an increasingly shallow way of responding to the larger questions of our time, we may very well be wise to prescind from traditional canons of interpretation and take a fresh look at what we articulate only vaguely but actually hold to be our basic beliefs. A primary example might be our understanding of nature, seen pre-eminently as space and as subject to man's fabrication. A second could be our understanding of time, seen as option, rather than as the measure of man's entropic situation. Both perspectives, although rooted in the early American experience, can claim powerful and direct relevance to the situation in which we now find ourselves.

Reflective Primitivism: Nature and Time

The influence of the land is sometimes looked upon as significant only in primitive conditions of life. With the coming of "civilization"; that is to say, trade and manufacture and organized cities, the land is supposed to diminish in importance. As a matter of fact, the importance of the land increases with civilization: "Nature" as a system of interests and activities is one of the chief creations of the civilized man. The literature pertaining to the meaning of nature as an American motif is extensive. It often involves an analysis of the relationship between the experience in America and the corresponding myth of the Garden or the quest for Eden. Following Sanford, this relationship includes the activities of both the "philosophers of primitivism" and the "trailblazers of progress":

...
The Edenic image, as I have defined it, is neither a static agrarian image of cultivated nature nor an opposing image of the wilderness, but an imaginative complex which, while including both images, places them in a dynamic relationship with other values. Like true myth or story, it functions on many levels simultaneously, dramatizing a people’s collective experience within a framework of polar opposites. The Edenic myth, it seems to me, has been the most powerful and organizing force in American culture.

A much less adequately analyzed notion is that of ‘time’. Of particular concern is the separation of the analysis of time from that of nature, as though honoring a dualism between the inner and outer man. Sidney Mead, for example, in a penetrating essay on the role of space in the development of the American people, asserts that “Americans have never had time to spare. What they did have during all their formative years was space—organic, pragmatic space—the space of action. And perhaps this made the real difference in the formation of ‘this new man’.” The “space of action,” however, should be seen as fundamentally a “time” category, for it structures possibility and gives to the immediate situation a quality of human participation that renders meaningful the temporal process.

Space is not a sufficiently humanizing context for man’s situation. When events are framed against novel occurrences, the experience of ordinary living takes on the hue of an imaginative reconstruction of life. James has told us that “according to my view, experience as a whole is a process in time.” But if the setting for this process, relative to each life lived, is characterized by repetition and by the plodding dullness of a context that rarely, if ever, is broken into by basic shifts in direction, then the “process” may be aeonically viable but of little import in immediate terms. Tillich sees this clearly. He holds that “while time and space are bound to each other in such an inescapable way, they stand in a tension with each other which may be considered as the most fundamental tension of existence.” But this tension is not one of a simple standoff, for it can be recast from the side of the human endeavor: “In man the final victory of time is possible. Man is able to act towards something beyond his death. He is able to have history, and he is able to transcend even the tragic death of families and nations, thus breaking through the circle of repetition towards something new. Because he is able to do so, he represents the potential victory of time; but not always the actual victory.”

We would argue that this statement of Tillich is a precise description, written small, of the historical American interaction between institutional possibilities and the setting of nature. Tillich, himself, after his American experience, seemed to arrive at the same viewpoint:

But in spite of these permanent contacts with the Old World, the New World grasped me with its irresistible power of assimilation and creative courage. . . . I saw the American courage to go ahead, to try, to risk failures, to begin again after defeat, to lead an experimental life both in knowledge and in action, to be opened toward the future, to participate in the creative process of nature and history.

Nature, as understood within the American tradition, was open and seminal for human life. This is not to say that nature, so understood, was simply and necessarily beneficent. It is to say, however, that the simple fact of prodigal space yielded a sense of secundity, possibility, and, above all, the challenge that was to be associated with man as “engaged” with nature. This fundamental attitude is phrased by the American explorer John Wesley Powell in an address in 1883 on the “Methods of Evolution”:

When a man loses faith in himself, and worships nature, and subjects himself to the government of the laws of physical nature, he lapses into stagnation, where mental and moral miasma is bred. All that makes man superior to the beast is the result of his own endeavor to secure happiness. . . . Man lives in the desert by guiding a river and fertilizing the sands with its waters, and the desert is covered with fields and gardens and homes.

Not only did this tradition deny that conforming to nature was the highest wisdom, it even awarded ultimate authority to the needs, admittedly often ostensible, of human activity. John Anderson speaks of eighteenth-century American thought as offering us “an original insight” into the relationship between man’s nature and the order of nature.

Thus American thinkers including John Adams and Thomas Jefferson made explicit the focus of men’s attention upon the New World
by describing the individual in the setting of the order of nature; and, in Jefferson’s case at least, contributing an original interpretation of the moral problem of man’s free natural action by describing the New World as the matrix required for the emergence of man’s moral nature.36

This anthropocentric approach to nature yields in turn a deep-seated paradox, still active in the American temperament. On the one side, the Edenic myth of the “garden,” while, on the other, a systematic destruction of natural resources under the press of an aggressive and collective adolescence in which liberation from feudal and antique political patterns generated a hostility to any structure, even the rhythm of the forests. Negative also was the cultural worship of youth, the absence of a De Senectute, and the refusal to recognize the price to be paid for squandering resources and doing often irreparable damage to the fabric of nature on which subsequent generations depended. In commenting on this situation, Anderson says, “Consider as one typical example the development of the Great Plains in the late 19th century. Here the effort to conquer the land was successful when reinforced by the Industrial Revolution; and the ultimate social effects were realized in the Dust Bowl of the 20th century.”37 Charles Sanford states the cultural significance of this relationship between unlimited possibility and the accent on youth:

The newness of the country, the expectation of some kind of rebirth or beatitude in the near future, and the eternal promise of future blessings associated with the land produced a distinct emphasis on youth in America... A psychic primitivism of youth replaced or accompanied geographical and cultural primitivism.... The cult of newness followed the pioneers westward; it fortified bumptious individualism in its never-ending contests with authority; it contributed to a characteristically American disrespect for tradition and history; it minimized fatally the large contribution which European civilization has made to our culture; it served as an important basis for criticism of the “new” industrial order and supplied the moral and intellectual framework within which it was to operate. Finally, it continued to haunt the American mind long after, conceivably, it should have reached maturity.38

There is considerable truth in these remarks. We should not forget, however, that the cult of youth is a reflection of a more important and far-reaching dimension of the American doctrine of nature. The emphasis on the immediate, on the good of this generation, and the absence of concern for the larger future is a symptom of a specific doctrine of “local time.” The significance of man, in this view, proceeds from his immediate situation rather than from his place in any meta-historical scheme. We could describe this as an American stoicism, wherein human life is inextricable from its relationship with nature, but yet free to formulate the character of this relationship, with increasing control, from the human side. This dialectic is expressed in an incisive text by John Anderson:

Thus both Emerson and Thoreau accepted the insight of their time, that man’s nature was that of a shaper, a constructor and maintainer. But they focused attention upon man’s autonomous nature, his intrinsic self; they insisted that each man saw himself not only as a part of the creative flow of experience but as a universal reference point in this flow. Viewed in this way, man was seen not as identical with the evolution of a novel strand in experience, but as a jewel which might reflect an inclusive and eternal meaning. Asked who he was, man could then reply, I am this universal spark. And with this statement he could maintain in principle his integrity in the course of his creative action wherever in particular this might lead him.39

In such a view, man has a future, but its prognosis should never be uprooted from the actual situation in which he finds himself. The future is to be realized generation by generation and its goals constantly re-worked in the light of man’s needs and capacities. “Experience had taught Americans,” Bryce reported, “that though the ascent of man may be slow it is also sure.”40 How “sure” it is remains open to serious question. But it may be generalized that the American tradition can be understood as the first posthistorical and communal rejection of an eschatological framework, which yet retains an aggressive doctrine of the meaning of history.41 Granted that there often is a shallow side to thinking simply in terms of generation to generation; nonetheless, such an attitude avoids the type of absolutist ideology, whether in the name of religious, metaphysical, or utopian political beliefs, that so often yields an oppressive immediate social order so as to guarantee some future way of life.
of human needs. This is the America so legitimately held up to ridicule by Boorstin and so often scorned by the American intellectual. In Tillich’s view, America “can be both a world power politically and a provincial people spiritually. Will the emphasis on the ‘American way of life’ produce such a situation?”

Repeating our opening analysis, the nub of the problem is that both cultural attitudes proceed basically from the same set of assumptions, generally understood. The doctrine of an open nature, romanticized as unfettered freedom and self-reliance, when assimilated without cognizance of the major problems inseparable from such a view, supports only a superficial version of cultural life. On the other hand, when understood in its full significance and admitting to the burdens of holding to such a perspective, the American tradition can sustain an approach to cultural life as rich as the great versions of the past.

If experience, nature, and time as historically undergone constitute the basic framework through which the qualities of the American tradition developed, the articulation of these categories constitutes another aspect of this problem. The full implications of the historical events in American life, worked out within the broad perspective of a reflective primitivism, are not realized until one binds such developments to their subsequent articulation, particularly by philosophy. This is especially true of our leading metaphor, experience. The development in American consciousness—from the “experience of experience” to the “notion of experience” and finally, with Dewey, to the “method of experience”—is of crucial importance from both the cultural and philosophical viewpoint. The question, of course, is whether the articulation of these deeply felt cultural traditions maintains the richness and immediacy of the original responses. Secondly, if such an articulation does keep fidelity with the tradition, can it also show relevance to the more specifically intellectual dimensions of its own mode of discourse? In a word, can American philosophy do philosophy and yet remain within the traditional cultural dispositions of the American cultural past? It would seem that while doing other things, American philosophy must do at least this much, if we are to avoid what Tillich fears—a future characterized by spiritual provincialism.
The Articulation of Experience

American philosophers, young and old, seen scratching where the wool is short...

—William James

In a recent essay on "The Return to Experience," Robert Johann tries anew to open up the importance of a shift away from "reflective thought" to that of the method of experience as the distinctively, personal activity of human life. He tells us that "any effort to locate the real in a realm distinct from everyday experience and somehow accessible only to thought will bypass the real altogether." Although the notion of experience has roots in Greek philosophy, and was a central concern for Kant as well as for Locke and Hume, it is clear that Johann places himself in the tradition of James and Dewey as another in a long line of commentators who attempt to break open this most obvious and yet most obscure of philosophical notions. James was right when he spoke of experience as a double-barrelled word, figuring as both thought and thing, as also Dewey, when he added:

Like its congener, life and history, it includes what men do and suffer, what they strive for, love, believe and endure, and also how men act and are acted upon, the ways in which they do and suffer, desire and enjoy, see, believe, imagine—in short, processes of experiencing. It is "double-barrelled" in that it recognizes in its primary integrity no division between act and material, subject and object, but contains them both in an unanalyzed totality, "thing" and "thought," as James says in the same connection, are single-barrelled; they refer to products discriminated by reflection out of primary experience.

Now, whatever the difficulties in the tangled philosophical literature about experience, a constant theme emerges, warning us against the intellectualizing of our situation to the extent that we cut ourselves off from the richer and unfettered immediacies of living. But these warnings themselves often take on a highly speculative character and soon become shadows of the very intellectualism they oppose. A fascinating parallel to this problem of "thinking about experience" is found in the brief history of postwar existentialism. In the effort to elucidate the full burden of living in tension between L'etranger and L'homme revole, philosophy, omnivorous to the end, blanketed the problem with a host of distinctions and clarifications, worthy of analytic philosophy, but hardly of the thrust of the existentialist concern. So, too, with the method of experience: easy to claim as a touchstone but exceedingly difficult to abide by within the very fabric of inquiry. Johann warns of this difficulty when he states that "the proper role of reflection is not to construct an escape from experience, but by seeking to formulate the links and connections that experience presents to us, gradually to enrich our awareness of what it is we are about and what is at stake, so that life itself, in the light of this awareness, can be lived with greater meaning and purposefulness."

Within the American context, the effort to remain faithful to the demands of experience has constantly been entangled with the assertion that the culture is fundamentally "anti-intellectual." Much has been written about this theme in American culture, and no doubt there are complex reasons for much of the antagonism shown the intellectual, particularly when one analyzes the political ramifications of class structure emanating from distinctions derived from education. In his comprehensive study of this problem, Hofstadter sees the roots of such an attitude in the primitive and evangelical dimensions of early America and its realization in the subsequent growth of the business mentality:

If evangelicalism and primitivism helped to plant anti-intellectualism at the roots of American consciousness, a business society assured that it would remain in the foreground of American thinking. Since the time of Tocqueville it has become a commonplace among students of America that business activism has provided an overwhelming counterpoise to reflection in this country. Tocqueville saw that the life of constant action and decision which was entailed by the democratic and businesslike character of American life put a premium upon rough and ready habits of mind, quick decision, and the prompt seizure of opportunities and that all this activity was not propitious for deliberation, elaboration, or precision in thought.

There is much to be said for this interpretation from the perspective of straight historical narrative, but its underlying philosophical assumption is open to question. Too often, the perspective from which evaluation is made accepts the classical distinction between the speculative and practical as permanent deposits in the activity of inquiry. In a general way,
Hofstadter recognizes this and attempts to redress such abstract dualisms as "intellect and emotion" and "intellect and practicality" by reworking the category of intellect. This approach is, however, an uphill struggle given the implicit philosophical framework of American culture. We should offer here a reworking from another perspective, namely, the refusal to accept any dualism at all, while yet trying to locate the life of reflection in terms of the wider context of experience. In this way, the history of those movements often thought to be anti-intellectual, if given a different setting for analysis, can perhaps be shown to have made decisive contributions to the way in which men seek and ground knowing.

It is not unimportant that in a general way, the American tradition involves a crucial shift in the method for ascertaining the major focus of inquiry. Because of the pre-eminence of the experience of nature as open and as subject to reconstruction, the prime analogates for inquiry have centered on life metaphors. From the very outset, the notions of growth, experiment, and liberty, along with a host of derived metaphors, have characterized inquiry in American life. This holds not only for those endeavors traditionally directed to so-called practical concerns but equally constitutes the very fiber of religious thought. Indeed, more revealing, such metaphors comprise the major language of the American philosophical tradition, when it finally emerges in the nineteenth century. With Emerson and again with Dewey, we have a philosophical concern that uses the language of cultural cliché. In a word, the problematic assumes the primary role, reserved elsewhere for the ineffable, the Good, or the language of being. In such a worldview, the most profound recesses of reflection are themselves burdened by the obligation to reconstruct experience so as to aid in the resolution of those difficulties seen to hinder growth. In an address at Union College in 1836, Gulian Verplanck carefully analyzes this attitude:

But it has often been objected that this all-absorbing gravitation towards the useful, the active, and the practical, in our country, propels every student from his most favorite studies into the struggles, the competition, and tumult of life, and is thus fatal at once to all recondite and curious learning, to deep attainment in pure science or polished excellence in elegant art and literature. There is certainly some portion of truth in this objection, and yet but a portion only.

The experience of scientific investigation has shown that such application of the test of reality and experiment to theoretic truth, has not only often thrown a clearer light on that theory, at once limiting its generalities and confirming its evidence, but has also evolved new combinations, suggested new inferences, and manifested higher laws. . . . Thus contemplations, apparently the most shadowy, have often operated with the greatest efficiency upon the most engrossing concerns of daily life.  

The passion for amelioration of the human plight, so carefully nurtured by the French philosophes, becomes almost a total cast of mind within the American tradition. Such a view is clearly put by Dewey, when he states that "Philosophy recovers itself when it ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men." Or again, with James, who tells us that "knowledge about life is one thing; effective occupation of a place in life, with its dynamic currents passing through your being, is another."

Thus American classical philosophy comprises a highly original effort to maintain a genuinely metaphysical concern within the limits of time and nature. Such an approach is most obviously characterized by the refusal to separate the efforts of intellectual life, including those of philosophy, from the burden of resolving concrete problems. Following James: "Ideals ought to aim at the transformation of reality—no less." This attempt at amelioration, which burdens the processes of thought, even those of so-called basic research, should not be seen as simply a pragmatic reductionism, directed to what James called the American "moral flabbiness born of the exclusive worship of the bitch-goddess Success." Rather than honoring a simple dualism between thought and action, the American bent toward the practical should be viewed from a wider perspective. Both the method of reflection and the method of action are to be seen as conjoined and rotating functionaries of an experimental approach. Neither method is self-contained or totally reliable but assumes priority relative to the nature of the problem to which it is directed. It is the problem and its resolution, or at least reconstruction.
on more enhancing terms, that occupies the place of importance in this approach to inquiry. The rotating priority of thought and action covers an important and infrequently analyzed assumption in American life; the contention that experience, as such, has informing, directive, and self-regulating qualities which are ordered and managed as subject to intelligence and as responsible to the burdens of the various contexts in which inquiry finds itself. Thought and action are functionaries of the method of experience in a culture which gives to experience qualities and powers usually denied in the larger tradition of Western thought. It is this underlying assumption as to the seminal character of the method of experience for both theory and practice that has to be isolated and reworked in the light of contemporary problems and language. Failure to do this results not only in our falling back into a crippling dualism between practical and speculative activity, on cultural lines, but also, as Dewey warns, denies us the riches of immediate experience in favor of an ever more vacuous conceptual tradition:

The serious matter is that philosophies have denied that common experience is capable of developing from within itself methods which will secure direction for itself and will create inherent standards of judgment and value. No one knows how many of the evils and deficiencies that are pointed to as reasons for flight from experience are themselves due to the disregard of experience shown by those peculiarly reflective. To waste of time and energy, to disillusionment with life that attends every deviation from concrete experience must be added the tragic failure to realize the value that intelligent search could reveal and mature among the things of ordinary experience.  

A brief commentary on this modern jeremiad by Dewey should put the question of the articulation of experience into some perspective. It is clear that Dewey, for one, accepts the assumption about the power of experience which is basic to American life. But he demands also an articulation of this assumption relative to the major problems faced by each generation and subject to the logical structures of the various methodological approaches as embodied in the disciplines of intellectual life.  

And his major concerns were with the notions of nature, growth, and human interaction with institutional life, often phrased out in the vein sketched here as characteristic language of the American temperament.

What Dewey laments is the separation of reflection from the method of experience. In a brilliant statement of the meaning of experience, "congenial to present conditions," Dewey contrasts his position with the "orthodox" view. The latter, in general terms, sees experience as blunt and always in need of conceptual formulation before performing any significant cognitive function. Dewey, on the contrary, sees experience as richly informing on its own terms, shot through, as it were, with implicitness and meaning. He offers that in his view "experience in its vital form is experimental" and has as its "salient trait" "connection with a future." For Dewey, experience is not antithetical to thought; he holds that there exists "no conscious experience without inference; reflection is native and constant."

Upon more careful analysis Dewey's view would be seen as incomparably richer than other statements of experience. Dewey, however, has presented a view of experience deeply rooted in a cultural attitude, against a philosophical statement of what has always been a derivative rather than primary notion in Western thought. Dewey fails to realize that his lamentation about the separation of reflection from the method of experience is far more of a sociological problem than one to be explicated in philosophical terms. From the point of view of contemporary philosophical thought, experience is simply too vague and bumptious a term to be used as the central category for structuring a logic of inquiry. For one recent commentator, "the most basic principle of this 'minimal' empiricism is that all ideas are derived from experience and the vagueness and ambiguity of the expression 'ideas', 'derived from', and 'experience', pretty well account for the history of modern empiricism."

We do not, however, discover the reason for the extraordinary priority given to the method of experience in American philosophy by restricting our analysis simply to philosophical language. The setting, after all, was quite different with philosophy elsewhere. Randall sees it this way: "American philosophy, come of age by the end of the nineteenth century, could draw on all the different European traditions. That has something to do with the fact that the giants of the last generation could bend them all to the illumination of American experience, in creating a distinctively new and American philosophical attitude and approach."
Perhaps the major thrust of this illumination is the place given experience itself. In a somewhat different vein, Tillich, in discussing the "pragmatic-experimental approach of American theology," can speak of the "emphasis on religious experience in the movements of evangelical radicalism that have largely formed the American mind and have made of experience a central concept in all spheres of man's intellectual life."\(^{62}\)

Although the history of the meaning of the notion of experience in American life has yet to be written, the American mood, even at the outset, more often than not anticipated the later contention of Emerson that "every ingenius and aspiring soul leaves the doctrine behind him in his own experience."\(^{63}\) The question, of course, is whether this is simply a philosophical correlate to the attitude of ingrained condescension to speculative learning—an attitude so cogently expressed in the commentary on a failure in a colonial Massachusetts iron works, wherein "experience hath outstripped learning here, and the most quick-sighted in the theory of things have been forced to pay pretty roundly to Lady Experience for filling their heads with a little of her active afterwit."\(^{69}\)

Or is Emerson's text to be read rather as an affirmation of the informing richness of experience as such; indeed, of the cognitive thrust in all events, particularly those through which we locate ourselves as persons? Originally biblical in meaning,\(^{70}\) the experience of the new world viewed the "land" as but the site on which the New Jerusalem was to be founded. Given the press of events, however, the focus of expectation soon shifted, and located around the land itself.\(^{71}\) In one of his poems, Thoreau calls for a new future by pointing to possibilities hardly credible anywhere else in nineteenth-century Western civilization:

All things invite this earth's inhabitants
To rear their lives to an unheard of height
And meet the expectation of the land.\(^{72}\)

And in our time, Robert Frost, celebrating what he hoped was a new beginning, significantly repeats the refrain of Thoreau:

To the land vaguely realizing westward,
But still unstoried, artless, unenhanced,
Such as she was, such as she would become.\(^{73}\)

The energizing to meet and engage the "expectations of the land" is but one version of the overarching dominance of situation over theory. Experience as sociological environment trumps philosophical thought at every turn. This is stated with clarity by Boorstin:

Through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—from Crevecoeur's notion that America had produced a new man, through Jefferson's belief in the wealth, promise, and magnificence of the continent, and Turner's faith in a frontier-born culture and frontier-nourished institutions—runs the refrain that American values spring from the circumstances of the New World, that these are the secret of the "American Way of Life." This refrain has been both an example of our special way of dealing with ideas and an encouragement to it. For lack of a better word, we may call this a leaning toward implicitness, a tendency to leave ideas embodied in experience, and a belief that the truth somehow arises out of the experience.

This carries with it a preference for the relevance of ideas as against their form and a surprising unconcern for the separability of ideas. We have seldom believed that the validity of an idea was tested by its capacity for being expressed in words. The beliefs that values come out of the context and that truth is part of the matrix of experience (and hardly separable from it) become themselves part of the way of American thinking—hence, the formlessness of American thought, its lack of treatises, schools, and systems.\(^{74}\)

It would seem that we should more openly admit that vision is most creative when it acknowledges an interaction within the actual limitations of our situation. In writing of James, Robert Pollock clarifies this problem:

James was endeavoring to take seriously the fact that reality does not address itself to abstract minds but to living persons inhabiting a real world, to whom it makes known something of its essential quality only as they go out to meet it through action. It is this concrete relation of man and his world, realized in action, which accounts for the fact that our power of affirmation outruns our knowledge, as when we feel or sense the truth before we know it.\(^{75}\)

The work of analysis in American life has to take into account the powerful assumption about experience as self-revealing as well as the living inseparability of world and action. Thought, traditionally, has no
privileged place in the American scheme. The burden of this essay is that
such an arrangement has been fortunate in relation to our culture, and
should be abandoned only with great caution.

Conclusion

At times contemporary reflective thought in America seems to identify
itself only by locating around a response to what is considered the tradi-
tional hostility to the intellectual. Such a response only confronts a by-
product of what is actually a long-standing and general cultural effort to
rework the nature of thought in terms of its functional role within the
Total human endeavor. From the Puritans to Dewey, one is offered a
series of efforts, alternating in stresses and varying in success, to account
for man’s most profound difficulties and concerns within the context of
ordinary experience. In that tradition, all-embracing systematic, truth,
whether it be theological, philosophical or political, was consistently
submitted to the broadly based canons of a constantly shifting collective
experience. Inevitably these doctrinal stances were broken under the
pressure of having to support a more than simply theoretical posture.
But there developed a highly sensitive feeling for the riches of experience
as a way of reconstructing doctrine rather than as a malleable resource
awaiting clarification. The doctrine of an open nature and the perpetual
return to the invigoration of frontier language provide a sense of re-
newal and local horizon which serve to constantly galvanize energies. As
a consequence, what appear to be more basic questions are often left to
fend for themselves in the rush of events. Is it not significant that the
major thinkers in the American tradition are recalled more for their atti-
itude and openness to possibility rather than for the specific resolution of
the problems they faced? This would seem particularly true of Emerson,
James, and Dewey, who, despite their concern with matters philosophi-

cal, have a mythic type of existence in the American tradition. Vaguely
understood as thinkers, but personally imbedded in the popular con-
sciousness as classic representations of the American mind, they seem to
serve in a nostalgic way as the redoubt against the increased complexity
of the modern world. Precisely because of this new role as played out in
popular culture, technical thought, especially philosophy, tends to by-
pass such versions of man’s situation.

In failing to recognize that the American tradition in its emphasis on
the method of experience, for purposes of human inquiry, constitutes a
contention of the highest philosophical priority, contemporary Ameri-
can thought has driven a new wedge between the role of philosophy and
the affairs of men. The going assumption often seems to hold that the
affection for experience, so notable in earlier American philosophical
thought, has a naive and propaedeutic ring to it. As such, it cannot con-
tinue as the basis for a response to the increasingly complex dimensions
which manifest themselves as characteristic of inquiry in our time. If
this assumption is basically sound, then we must conclude that no mat-
ter what its verve and boldness in avoiding systematic thought, the em-
phasis on experience in previous American thought, while remaining a
cultural deposit in the wide sense, has only peripheral philosophical sig-
nificance. Such a bifurcation, however, falls prey to Dewey’s warning
that “philosophy in America will be lost between chewing a historic cud
long since reduced to woody fiber, or an apologetics for lost causes (lost
to natural science), or a scholastic, schematic formalism, unless it can
somehow bring to consciousness America’s own needs and its own im-

cise principle of successful action.”

By way of summary, our position here contends that the separation of
the method of analysis, be it historical or philosophical in concern,
from the basic leaning of the culture, has two pejorative results. First,
widening Dewey’s concern, analysis (particularly so in the academic for-

mulation increasingly characteristic of it) finds itself caught in a circle
of self-sustenance, using the same language for both criticism and de-
scription with only rare and ineffectual points of contact with the wider
culture. Secondly, as the culture develops an increased dependence on
intellectual expertise, there is a tendency to neglect the obligation to con-
join analysis and the reconstruction of experience. It is, after all, far
easier to confront the interiorized difficulties relative to each discipline,
particularly those of the humanities and social sciences, than it is to take
full cognizance of actual events, which by their very nature occur as in-
terdisciplinary phenomena. It can be granted that the penchant for ex-
perience as the major source for the language of inquiry often leads to a
lack of rigor and precision in speculative formulations. Yet such an ap-
proach has the important advantage of avoiding the deception that ac-
crues to those who assume that events happen readymade for analysis
within the striated limitations of single disciplines.27 Openness to experience, with its historical roots in an anthropomorphic view of nature and a sense of frontier as human horizon, is to be understood as more than an outdated cliché. It should be seen rather as a fundamental attitude through which are strained the tasks of intellect, ever pressed to take account of the novelty that is manifested in the onrush of events. Above all, we should accept the stricture of James that “experience, as we know, has ways of boiling over, and making us correct our present formulas.”28 Such corrections are at the behest of experience but their articulation is the task of reflective reconsideration and reformulation.29 We must strive to institutionalize this dialectic between the press of experience and the wisdom of reflection.

Let Peirce have the last word. An American philosopher of the first rank and no sentimentalist on these matters, he tells us that “without beating longer round the bush let us come to close quarters. Experience is our only teacher.” And “how does this action of experience take place? It takes place by a series of surprises.”30

FOUR

SPIRES OF INFLUENCE

The Importance of Emerson for Classical American Philosophy

∞

And, striving to be man, the worm
Mounts through all the spires of form.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature”

I

Perhaps the title of this chapter should be “Why Emerson?” as that would better reflect how I came to write this piece. It is not so much that I have had to become convinced of the singular importance of the thought of Emerson, for the writing and teaching of Joseph Blau,1 as well as that of Robert C. Pollock,2 long ago made that clear to me. Rather the query about “Why Emerson?” proceeds from my study of the classic American philosophers, especially William James, Josiah Royce, and John Dewey. Despite their differences and disagreements, often extreme in both personal style and doctrine, these powerful and prescient philosophers did have at least one influence in common—the thought of Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Another major figure of the American classical period, George Santayana, seems to be a case apart. Santayana had an abiding interest in Emerson’s thought and refers frequently to Emerson in his own writings. His judgments on Emerson vary from admiration and affection to pointed, and even harsh, criticism. I do not think that Emerson was a
soverign; a community of the uprooted, of migrants who have turned their 
backs on the past in which they were born, who have thrown off the disciplines 
of traditional authority, for whom continuing institutions command only	 
tentative allegiance and have only an attenuated personality; a caravan on the 
mov; squatters sojourning in a mansion where all the cluttering furniture of 
the past has been banished to the attic; a commonwealth where authority, 
reduced to a minimum, is hedged about with safeguards and government serves 
the limited purpose of a framework within which individuals find their levels 
in voluntary and ever-shifting groups and minorities preserve their identity in 
a plural order; a society fluid and experimental, uncommitted to rigid values, 
cherishing freedom of will and choice and bestowing all the promise of the 
future on those with the manhood to reject the past.”

72. Cited on the frontispiece of Thistlethwaite, *The Great Experiment*.
French disappointment in eighteenth-century America is graphically stated by 
74. Of course, not all commentators are as sanguine about America. One 
thinks immediately about the brilliant and bitter critique of the American 
approach to experience, as found in Melville’s *The Confidence Man*. In a recent 
commentary on Melville, Lorenz Baritz concludes with the statement: “With 
civilization in America came the ultimate tragedy: the eternal passing of the 
Typee valley from mankind’s sober hope. America now took her place among 
the nations as a land like any other. Americans now were merely men. The land 
had come of age, and age was time and tragedy and the end” (Baritz, *City on a 
75. George Santayana, “The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy,” in 
*Winds of Doctrine* (New York, 1957), 186–87. We would not, of course, support 
the imagery of “old wine in new bottles.”
76. Speaking of the American, Henry Bamford Parkes states that “his char-
acter was molded not by the complex moral and social obligations of an or-
dered hierarchical system, but by the struggle to achieve victory over nature” 
77. These problems will be given further analysis in a sequel to this essay; see 
chapter 3 of the present volume.

**CHAPTER THREE**

**AN AMERICAN ANGLE OF VISION, PART 2**

1. America will not have forever to articulate her specific “angle of vision”; 
1959 [1888]), 111. In 1888, Bryce wrote about American institutions as follows: 
“They represent an experiment in the rule of the multitude, tried on a scale 
unprecedentedly vast, and the results of which everyone is concerned to watch. 
And yet they are something more than an experiment, for they are believed to 
dispose and display the type of institutions towards which, as by a law of fate, 
the rest of civilized mankind are forced to move, some with swifter, others with 
slower, but all with unresting feet.” The scene has shifted drastically, and this 
is no longer so, for there are again several options extant as to structuring basic 
political and social institutions, and in many areas the American version is out 
of favor. No small reason for this is the often inept and uncomfortable way in which 
America has expressed the qualities of her own tradition.

15 (Winter 1965): 69–93; see also chapter 2 in the present volume.
4. Sidney E. Mead, “The American People: Their Space, Time and Reli-
gion,” in *The Lively Experiment* (New York, 1963).
5. Ibid., 7–8; emphasis added.
6. The statement of Rathenau is taken from Andre Gide, *Imaginary Inter-
views*, as cited by Harry Levin, “Some European Views of Contemporary Ameri-
can Literature,” in *The American Writer and the European Tradition*, ed. 
183–84.
8. John A. Kouwenhoven, *Made in America: The Arts in Modern Civiliza-
tion* (New York, 1962 [1948]).
can Culture—Dominant Ideas and Images*, ed. Joseph J. Kwiat and Mary C. Tur-
pie (Minneapolis, 1960), 39.
11. The absence of an ancient tradition is itself often seen as a mixed blessing. 
On the one hand, Rilke can speak of the “ever swifter vanishing of so much 
that is visible, whose place will not be supplied. Even for our grandparents a 
‘House’, a ‘Well’, a familiar tower, their very dress, their cloak, was infinitely 
more, infinitely more intimate: almost everything a vessel in which they found 
and stored humanity. Now there come crowding over from America empty, 
indifferent things, pseudo-things, dummy-life . . . . A house, in the American 
understanding, an American apple or vine, has NOTHING in common with 
the house, the fruit, the grape into which the hope and meditation of our fore-
fathers had entered . . . . The animated, experienced things that SHARP OUR 
lives are coming to an end and cannot be replaced. WE ARE PERHAPS THE LAST
TO HAVE STILL KNOWN SUCH THINGS” (“Appendix 4,” Duino Elegies, trans. J. B. Leishman and Stephen Spender [New York, 1939], 129). But D. W. Brogan, American Aspects (New York, 1964) states that “it was because the American wasn’t so burdened with the past, had no such damnosa hereditas to live down or live with that Goethe declared: “Amerika du hast es besser” (155).

12. Herman Melville, The Confidence Man (New York, 1949 [1847]). Among countless instances, cf. 64–65: “Now tell me, sir,” said he with the book, “how comes it that a young gentleman like you, a sedate student at the first appearance, should dabble in stocks and that sort of thing?”

“...there are certain sophomores in the world,” drawled the sophomore, deliberately adjusting his shirt-collar, “not the least of which is the popular notion touching the nature of the modern scholar, and the nature of the modern scholastic sedateness.”

“So it seems, so it seems. Really, this is quite a new leaf in my experience.”

“Experience, sir,” originally observed the sophomore, “is the only teacher.”

“Hence am I your pupil: for it’s only when experience speaks that I can endure to listen to speculation.”

“My speculations, sir,” dryly drawing himself up, “have been chiefly governed by the maxims of Lord Bacon; I speculate in those philosophies which come home to my business and bosom—pray, do you know of any other good stocks?”


25. A similar transformation was effected in American economic theory of the nineteenth century. The basic theme at that time was the American environmental experience over against the homo economicus of the reigning Classical school. Cf., for example, Ernest Teihac, Pioneers of American Economic Thought in the Nineteenth Century (New York, 1936).


29. Sanford’s work is a partial exception to this, for he tries to “make clear the view that the paradisiac impulse and metaphor does not depend solely upon nature as its setting, but has been broadly associated with a rich abundance of inward and outward life in contrast to the fancied poverty of existing conditions” (Sanford, The Quest for Paradise, viii). But the framework of the Edenic myth is so eschatological in emphasis, that the full import of the American approach to time consequently is underplayed.

30. Mead, American People, 5.


33. Ibid., 31.


35. Cited in Arthur A. Eikirch Jr., Man and Nature in America (New York, 1963), 85. There is an intriguing parallel to this attitude as found in a later approach of the Soviet Union; cf. Albert E. Burke, “Influence of Man Upon Nature—The Russian View: A Case Study,” in Man’s Role in Changing the Face of the Earth, ed. William L. Thomas Jr. (Chicago, 1956), 1048. Burke cites a 1929 textbook written for children of the Soviet Union. “We must discover and conquer the country in which we live. It is a tremendous country, but not yet entirely ours. Our steppe will truly become ours only when we come with columns of tractors and plows to break the thousand-year-old virgin soil. On a far-flung front we must wage war. We must burrow into the earth, break rocks, dig mines, construct houses . . . .” And again, the remark of a Russian plant scientist that “we can expect no favors from Nature: our job is to take them.”
Ideology aside, there is still an inadequately analyzed parallel between the relationship of frontier and technology as operative in both societies. The difference seems to be located in the articulated symbolism of the meaning of frontier for American life in all its endeavors.

37. Ibid., p. 41.
41. The primitive strain in the American view of time and nature is particularly fascinating because it is structured outside of the “primitive” and prehistorical doctrine of nature as cyclic; cf. Mircea Eliade, Cosmos and History—The Myth of the Eternal Return (New York, 1959), esp. pp. 1-92.
42. Cf. Tillich, “Struggle,” p. 34, where, speaking of Greek culture, he claims that “they have no dynamic trend to go beyond it. They are in space, fulfilling it with divine force, bound to their space, expressing the tragic limitation of it. Greek reason never was able to overcome this limitation. Even the logic of Aristotle is a spatial logic, unable to express the dynamic trend of time. There is no philosophy of history in Greek thought, and where history is dealt with it is considered as only a section of the long circular motion of the whole cosmos from birth to death, of one world replacing the other. Time is swallowed by space in this cosmological tragedy.”
43. The necessarily anthropomorphic character of all views about man’s place in the world is argued by Martin Versfeld, “Reflections on Evolutionary Knowledge,” International Philosophical Quarterly 5 (May 1965): 221-47.
45. Nature and time have been much less adequately treated from the philosophical side in American thought. An exception is the classic work of John Dewey, Experience and Nature (New York, 1952 [1929]). Actually, all three themes are analyzed in a series of essays by John Herman Randall Jr., Nature and Historical Experience (New York, 1958).
47. Ibid., p. 329.
57. James, Letters, p. 2270.
58. Ibid., p. 260.
61. In an earlier series of essays, Dewey had argued in great detail that “knowledge” is a narrow category and falls short of revealing the manifold ways in which experience teaches; cf. The Influence of Darwin and Other Essays in Contemporary Thought (New York, 1951 [1910]), esp. “The Experimental Theory of Knowledge,” pp. 77-111; “Experience and Objective Idealism,” pp. 198-225; and “The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism,” pp. 226-41, which are particularly relevant.
63. An unassimilated but fascinating account of the sociological dimensions in American classical philosophy is to be found in C. Wright Mills, Sociology and Pragmatism, ed. Irving Louis Horowitz (New York, 1964).
64. Alan Pasch, Experience and the Analytic — A Reconsideration of Empiricism (Chicago, 1958), p. 5.
66. John Herman Randall Jr., How Philosophy Uses Its Past (New York, 1963), 88. For an earlier and more general assessment, see idem, “Spirit of American Philosophy,” in Wellsprings of the American Spirit (New York, 1948), 133. In speaking of the contribution of American thought, he comments that “it adds a new level to the long tradition of Western philosophical thought because it brings the lessons learned from American experience to all the lessons men had learned before and left for us in the embodied philosophical wisdom of the past.”


68. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Compensation,” in Works (Boston, 1903), 295.

69. Cited in Edmund Fuller, Tinkers and Genius—The Story of the Yankee Inventors (New York, 1955), 34.

70. The persistent biblicism of American life has been insufficiently treated or else viewed in narrow doctrinal terms. A good introductory statement is found in Joseph Gaer and Ben Siegel, The Puritan Heritage—America’s Roots in the Bible (New York, 1964); cf. also Williams, Wilderness and Paradise.

71. The complex symbolism that accompanies America’s attempt to retain the biblical metaphor but yet avoid the literalism and religious orthodoxy that accompany such a tradition is of central importance to the development of American thought, at all levels. It is unfortunate that the important work of Robert Pollock in this critical area remains largely unpublished; see his “Ralph Waldo Emerson—The Single Vision,” in American Classics Reconsidered, ed. Harold Gardiner (New York, 1958), 15–58.


77. Education as a discipline offers an instructive illustration. To the extent that it remains tied to its own categories, aridity and pretense dominate. To the extent that it opens itself up to the language and concerns of the wider culture, as, for example, technology or the sociology of the school, the discipline is re-vivified; cf. Ronald Gross and Judith Murphy, eds., The Revolution in the Schools (New York, 1964).

78. William James, Pragmatism (New York, 1947 [1907]), 222, and idem, A Pluralistic Universe (New York, 1947 [1909]), 212: “Reality, life, experience, concreteness, immediacy, use what word you will, exceeds our logic, overflows and surrounds it.”

79. Cf. James Feibleman, An Introduction to Peirce’s Philosophy (New York, 1946), 200, where, in a paraphrase of Peirce, he states that “experience contains an element which is forceful and unavoidable, and yet requires an act of attention to appreciate fully.”


Chapter Four
SPIRES OF INFLUENCE

The Importance of Emerson for Classical American Philosophy


