Lawrence Levine, *The Unpredictable Past: Explorations in American Cultural History* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993)

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Progress and Nostalgia: The Self Image of the Nineteen Twenties

I wrote this essay at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, England, where I was a visiting professor during the academic year, 1967–68. When I was completing my study of William Jennings Bryan—*Defender of the Faith: William Jennings Bryan, the Last Decade, 1915–1925* (1965)—I worried about the fact that I had not done enough to test my thesis that Bryan embodied the concerns and attitudes of his constitutency in the South and West. At the time I wrote that book I simply didn't know enough about how to search for mass attitudes. I did treat the responses of Bryan's constituencies to such movements as Fundamentalism, the Ku Klux Klan, and Prohibition, but I didn't go any further. Once the book was completed, I began to explore other possibilities in my teaching by extending my inquiry to the popular and mass culture that became so important after World War I. Shortly after I arrived in Norwich, I was asked to give a number of public lectures in England and on the Continent. For material for these lectures I turned to the wide spectrum of cultural materials I had been using in my Berkeley courses.

This essay, which reflects my first hesitant attempts to utilize popular culture to augment and test some of the arguments I had made in my study of Bryan, is based upon one of the public lectures I gave during my year abroad. I had never before tested these materials outside the classroom, and I was encouraged by the interested responses of audiences both in England and Germany. I was also emboldened to use these materials more openly by my growing conviction that until historians supplemented the ubiquitous printed record with the materials of folk and popular culture, they would never be able to recover the voices of those who had been rendered historically inarticulate because they were not adequately represented by printed sources or at least by the *kinds* of printed sources traditionally used by American historians.

One of my colleagues at East Anglia, the novelist and critic Malcolm Bradbury, was in the audience when I spoke on the culture of the 1920s, and he offered to include the piece in a collection he was editing. It was one of the very first of my essays accepted for publication and appeared in Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer eds., *The American Novel and the Nineteen Twenties* (London: Edward Arnold, 1971).

I

Americans have always been comfortable with the idea of progress. The belief that inevitable change brought with it inevitable advancement and betterment fitted easily with, and was reinforced by, the stress on the individual, the belief in human perfectibility, the relative rootlessness and lack of tradition, the unparalleled mobility, the indefatigable optimism, the sense of uniqueness and destiny that has characterized so much of America's history. "Democratic nations," Tocqueville wrote, taking the United States as his model, "care but little for what has been, but they are haunted by visions of what will be; in this direction their unbounded imagination grows and dilates beyond all measure." Evidence of the validity of Tocqueville's observation abounds everywhere from Jefferson's assertion, "The creator has made the earth for the living, not the dead," to Senator Orville Platt's jubilant announcement in the last decade of the nineteenth century, "We live in a new creation. Literally, the old things have passed away and all things have become new. Human society is full of creators." When Emerson proclaimed that the one fundamental split in society was between the Party of the Past and the Party of the Future, the Party of Memory and the Party of Hope, and described himself as "an endless seeker, with no past at my back," he seemed to be speaking for his countrymen in general.

Only recently have scholars come to the realization that the ode to progress, no matter how eloquently composed, was not alone in the land; it was accompanied by a cry of longing for what had been.[1] The compulsion to peer forward was paralleled by an urge to look backward to a more pristine, more comfortable, more familiar time. Nostalgia is beginning to be recognized as an historical force no less prevalent and perhaps no less important than the idea of progress. Nor were its roots dissimilar. The imagery which pictured nineteenth-century Americans as latter-day Adams in an Edenic "Garden of the World," may have allowed them to visualize themselves as free to rise, favoured as they were by a perfect and completely open environment and untrammelled by the taint of original sin or the heritage of the past, but it also confronted them with the dilemma of whether the roads from Eden could lead anywhere but down. Richard Hofstadter has captured

this dilemma perfectly in his ironic comment that "the United States was the only country in the world that began with perfection and aspired to progress." Thomas Jefferson served as a paradigm of this dilemma when he assured his country of its destined power and influence at the same time that he urged it to retain its purity and simplicity by remaining a nation of agrarians.

The central paradox of American history, then, has been a belief in progress coupled with a dread of change; an urge towards the inevitable future combined with a longing for the irretrievable past; a deeply ingrained belief in America's unfolding destiny and a haunting conviction that the nation was in a state of decline. This duality has been marked throughout most of America's history but seldom has it been more central than during the decade after the First World War. The force of nostalgia was manifest in the nineteen twenties in three related but distinct forms: a national movement to restore to America a former purity, cohesiveness and national purpose which had been diluted by the introduction of "alien" elements and ideologies; a cultural schism which saw a large segment of the population alienated from modernity and longing to return, at least symbolically, to a golden past; and a profound ambivalence towards the future which affected the actions and rhetoric of even some of the most fervid apostles of the "New Era."

II

The nineteen twenties were ushered in by the failure of a prophecy—specifically, Woodrow Wilson's prophetic assurance to his countrymen that he was leading "this great peaceful people into war" in order to foster the world-wide adoption of American democratic principles and forms: "for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own Governments, for the rights and liberties of small nations, for a universal dominion of right." To enlist the American people fully in this cause, German ideology was converted into the very antithesis of everything America stood for. Prussian militarism had to be contained to ensure the principle of self-determination of all peoples; German materialism had to be defeated if the principles of Christianity which the United States represented were to have any chance of universal application. "This war," a member of the Committee of Public Information wrote to George Creel, "is being fought in the minds of great masses of people as truly as it is being fought on the battle fields of Europe."

How seriously this missionary impulse was taken is illustrated by the American reaction to the February Revolution in Russia. The United States was the first nation to extend diplomatic recognition to Kerensky's provisional government for, as Wilson put it, the overthrow of Czarist autocracy

in Russia now gave America "a fit partner of a League of Honor." From the beginning the United States viewed the Russian Revolution through the prism of American ideology. "It was the American flag that has brought about the peaceable revolution in Russia," the *Des Moines Register* concluded on 23 March 1917, "and it is the American flag that will bring about the revolution in Germany, peaceable or violent, for that revolution is bound to come. It is American ideals that dominate the world." When Russian determination to fight the war faltered in the Spring of 1917, the United States sent a commission headed by Elihu Root to reassure the provisional government and strengthen its will. After some time spent in travelling through Russia, Root wired Wilson: "We have found here an infant class in the art of being free containing 170 million people and they need to be supplied with kindergarten material. . . ."

The October Revolution which established Lenin and Trotsky in power, and the Versailles Treaty which indicated that the war aims of the Allies were not in concord with those of Wilson, left the messianic prophecies of the United States everywhere in ruins. The resulting disappointment supposedly impelled a disillusioned American people to turn inward, to abandon their former dreams, to forsake idealism for hedonism. "Feeling cheated," Lloyd Morris has written: "the war generation was cynical rather than revolutionary. It was tired of Great Causes. . . . It wanted slices of the national cake. There resulted the general decision to be amused."

In fact, the immediate aftermath of the First World War exhibited the opposite tendencies. Americans did not abandon their old verities and values but reasserted them with renewed vigour. The psychologist Leon Festinger and his associates, in their study of prophetic movements, concluded that while there are limits beyond which belief will not withstand disconfirmation, the introduction of contrary evidence often serves not to destroy the belief but rather to strengthen the conviction and enthusiasm of the believers. The dissonance resulting from the clash of a belief-system and facts which tend to discredit it produces anxiety which can be reduced in one of three ways: by discarding the disconfirmed belief; by blinding oneself to the fact that the prophecy has not been fulfilled; by reconfirming the belief and increasing proselytizing in the hope that "if more and more people can be persuaded that the system of belief is correct, then clearly it must be correct."[2]

Although Americans exhibited all three tendencies during the nineteen twenties, the latter two, and especially the third, constituted by far the most prevalent responses. With respect to Russia, for instance, there was little disposition to recognize that Americans had misinterpreted the direction and meaning of the revolutions of 1917. At first the Bolshevik regime was seen as merely a passing phase in the Russian drive to adopt American ideals. George Kennan predicted that the new regime would fail because it violated

"certain fundamental economic laws," and for two years after the October Revolution the *New York Times* repeatedly (ninety-one times in all) reported that the Bolsheviks were on the brink of defeat. While Wilson joined England and France in an abortive attempt to bring down the new government by sending troops to Siberia, his ultimate response was to deny the existence of the Bolsheviks by withholding recognition; a refusal which the United States persisted in until Franklin Roosevelt took office in 1933.

On the domestic front, too, the defeat of American predictions about the effects of the First World War resulted in a nationwide tendency to reassert the viability and meaning of the very principles and beliefs upon which the failed prophecy had been erected. The full significance of the Red Scare of 1919 cannot be grasped unless it is perceived as an attempt to restate traditional American values, to reconfirm long-standing American images, to purify the nation and call it back to its historic mission by ridding it of intruding ideologies and groups. Stanley Coben, utilizing the anthropological theories of Anthony F. C. Wallace, has likened the Red Scare to a "revitalization movement" (other examples of which were the American Indian Ghost Dance cults of the late nineteenth century and the Boxer movement in China from 1898 to 1900), which under the spur of intensive social disruption attempts to relieve anxiety by reviving central cultural beliefs and values and eliminating alien influences.[3]

The emphasis upon revivification was omnipresent in the early postwar years: in the national repudiation of every possible form of radicalism; in the reaction against strikes and unionization; in the race riots of 1919 which struck out against the changed image and status of black Americans; in Warren Harding's assurance to his countrymen that theirs was a time for "not heroics but healing; not nostrums but normalcy; not revolution but restoration." A substantial portion of the nation faced the new decade not in excited anticipation of what might be or in stubborn satisfaction with what was, but with a nostalgic yearning for what had been. Americans continued to have grandiose hopes for the future, but increasingly their dreams were moulded upon the patterns of the past.

Nowhere was this clearer than in the national attitude toward immigration and acculturation. A heterogeneous conglomeration of peoples, Americans above all other nationalities have had to strive for a sense of national identity and speculate endlessly about the process by which the diverse national and ethnic groups emigrating to the United States became American. The most familiar concept, of course, was that of the melting pot which Crèvecoeur spoke of as early as the seventeen eighties when he wrote, "Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men," and which Frederick Jackson Turner was still celebrating at the end of the nineteenth century when he concluded that "In the crucible of the frontier the immigrants were Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race, English

in neither nationality nor characteristics.'' ''America is God's crucible,'' the hero of the 1908 play *The Melting Pot* exclaimed, ''. . . A fig for your feuds and vendettas! Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians—into the Crucible with you all! God is making the American.''

The concept of the melting pot was a unique and difficult base upon which to build a sense of identity, since it posited an ever-changing American image dependent entirely upon the ethnic components that were ''melted'' down. Indeed, for many Americans the concept was too difficult and, as Milton Gordon has shown, the melting pot was continually confronted by a counter concept—the idea of Anglo-conformity. If immigrants to the United States could not accommodate themselves to the nation's character, ''moral, political and physical,'' John Quincy Adams wrote in 1818, ''the Atlantic is always open to them to return to the land of their nativity and their fathers. To one thing they must make up their minds, or they will be disappointed in every expectation of happiness as Americans. They must cast off the European skin, never to resume it.'' ''Our task,'' an educator asserted one hundred years later, ''is to . . . assimilate and amalgamate these people as a part of our American race, and to implant in their children, so far as it can be done, the Anglo-Saxon conception of righteousness, law and order, and popular government. . . .''[4]

A number of reformers during the Progressive Era took the melting pot idea one step further in complexity by arguing for ''cultural pluralism.'' The United States, they maintained, should become a ''democracy of nationalities,'' a ''nation of nations,'' in which every ethnic group retained many of its identifying characteristics, each living in harmony with the others. While this concept may have come closer to describing the reality of the acculturation process than either of the others, it never took strong hold of the American imagination. The First World War not only made it difficult for ideas like cultural pluralism to take root; it led to the rejection of the melting pot itself. Profoundly disturbed by the sight of German- and Irish-Americans openly calling for the victory of the Central Powers and immigrants from the subject peoples of the Austrian Empire along with English- and French-Americans siding with the Allies, large numbers of Americans, from the President down, reacted against what were popularly called ''hyphenated Americans.'' ''When the Klan first appeared,'' its Imperial Wizard Hiram Wesley Evans recalled, ''the nation was in the confusion of sudden awakening from the lovely dream of the melting pot. . . . [Nordic Americans] decided that even the crossing of salt water did not dim a single spot on a leopard; that an alien usually remains an alien no matter what is done to him. . . . They decided that the melting pot was a ghastly failure. . . .''

For all his hyperbole, Evans reflected the national mood. In the Americanization movement with its emphasis upon ''One country, one language, one flag,'' and in the immigration acts of 1921 and 1924 with their national origins formula which reversed the tide of immigration from southern and eastern Europe and Asia in favour of the more familiar northern European countries, this mood was made explicit. Americans in the postwar era were turning away from the idea of the melting pot with its dynamic, future-oriented concept of national identity and embracing the notion of Anglo-conformity which looked to the past and took as its model the early Anglo-American. If the term ''melting pot'' remained in use, it came to symbolize less and less a crucible which boiled *down* differences into a new composite identity and more and more one which boiled *out* differences into the image of the old American. To be sure, the melting pot concept had been attacked periodically in the nativist movements of the nineteenth century, but not until the nineteen twenties was the reaction strong enough to legislate it out of existence. In their immigration policies, as in so much else, Americans during the nineteen twenties exhibited a national urge to turn backwards in an effort to recapture the images and meaning of their country's youth.

III

It would, of course, be an egregious misreading of the nineteen twenties to maintain that it was *primarily* a backward-looking decade. The ''New Era'' deserved its title in many respects. The impact of the new technology, of the automobile, of mass production and consumption, of the radio, the movies and other forms of mass media, of modernist religious teachings in the churches, of the enhanced political and cultural influence of large cities, of the greater emphasis upon science in the schools which now reached far greater portions of the population than ever before in American history, of new moral codes and standards, was very real and constituted what Walter Lippmann called the ''acids of modernity'' which were eating into and transforming the entire society.

Historians in emphasizing these developments to the exclusion of all else, however, have been in danger of ignoring the tone and aspirations of a large part of the United States. As I have argued elsewhere at greater length, the tendency to see the nineteen twenties as an age of materialism in which the American people turned their backs upon idealism and reform does not accurately describe a decade which was marked by furious struggles waged over prohibition, religion, the rights of Catholics and Jews, the very nature of the morality and ethos that would define and guide Americans in the years to come. If the term ''idealism'' is used to define not merely those movements of which historians approve but any movement that puts forward a set of principles about which people feel strongly enough to band

together and fight for, then idealism and crusading zeal were still very much alive throughout the decade.[5]

The millions of Americans who joined or at least sympathized with the Ku Klux Klan and fundamentalist movements and who fought for the enforcement of prohibition were an indication that a substantial part of the population greeted the new forces of the nineteen twenties with a sense of loss, frustration and antipathy. They were as alienated from the ethos and developments of the age as the bitterest members of the Lost Generation. They attempted to reverse the trends dominating modern America and return to the moral and ethical code of the past. They longed for the *Gemeinschaft*, the community, which they had been brought up to believe was central to America. They constituted one half of a pervasive sectional and cultural schism that disrupted the prewar progressive coalition, prevented the resurgence of a new political and economic reform movement, rendered the Democratic Party almost impotent, and prevented the nineteen twenties from ever becoming the materialistic, hedonistic age it has been pictured as.

The United States with its heterogeneity, individualism, mobility and success ethic may never have furnished fertile soil for the growth of a true *Gemeinschaft* culture characterized by permanence, intimacy and binding tradition. But the rural, small-town cultures of nineteenth-century America, which Robert Wiebe has called "island communities," at least approached this ideal in principle if not always in fact. The insularity of these communities was first seriously disturbed by the nationalizing tendencies of the expanding industrial economy after the Civil War. This threat to the independence and integrity of small-town America helped give rise to the reform movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which Richard Hofstadter has characterized as efforts "to realize familiar and traditional ideals under novel circumstances." By the early decades of the twentieth century the threat had expanded inevitably to the social and cultural spheres. The further Americans were carried from their version of the *Gemeinschaft* the more ideal it seemed to become.

In 1925 a woman in Muncie, Indiana, recalled that

> In the nineties we were all much more together. People brought chairs and cushions out of the house and sat on the lawn evenings. We rolled out a strip of carpet and put cushions on the porch steps to take care of the unlimited overflow of neighbors that dropped by. We'd sit out so all evening. The younger couples perhaps would wander off for half an hour to get a soda but come back to join in the informal singing or listen while somebody strummed a mandolin or guitar.

By the twenties the citizens of Muncie were besieged by newspaper and magazine advertisements urging them to buy automobiles and "Increase Your Weekend Touring Radius." "A man who works six days a week," a banker was quoted in one such ad, "and spends the seventh on his own doorstep certainly will not pick up the extra dimes in the great thoroughfares of life." On 4 July 1891, a Muncie merchant noted in his diary: "The town full of people—grand parade with representatives of different trades, an ox roasted whole, four bands, fire-works, races, greased pig, dancing all day, etc." On 4 July 1925, Robert and Helen Lynd found Muncie deserted; its inhabitants had taken to the road.

The automobile was only the most visible and dramatic symbol of the new forces that were eroding traditional standards and modes of action in religion, morality, familial patterns, life styles. The changes left large numbers of Americans bewildered and alienated. Unlike the writers and artists of the Lost Generation they could not escape to Europe or to bohemian enclaves within the United States. Instead they attempted to contain the forces reshaping America through a series of movements which, unlike the Red Scare and anti-immigration movements, were regional rather than national in character. It is important to understand that the cultural regionalism exemplified by prohibition, fundamentalism and the Klan was psychic and not purely geographic in character. All three movements had supporters in large cities as well as in small towns and rural communities, but it would be a mistake to deduce from this that they were therefore urban as well as rural in tone and purpose. The large numbers of urban migrants from rural, small-town America faced a difficult, often impossible, cultural adjustment which left them bereft of identity. They, perhaps even more than those who remained behind, craved a lost sense of community and longed for a reassertion of the old moral values. Though they were technically urbanites—inhabitants of the *Gesellschaft*—they were psychically attuned to the cultures from which they had emigrated. They supported prohibition, fundamentalism and the Klan precisely because these movements promised a real or symbolic flight from the new America back to the familiar confines of the old.

The fate of the prohibition experiment provides an excellent example. Prohibition came into being as a movement during the reform ethos of Jacksonian America and retained its reformist overtones right down to the nineteen twenties. It won the support of a large segment of the nation's progressives and was passed in the form of a constitutional amendment during the Progressive Era itself by reformers who could see nothing more reactionary in deciding that man for his own good must not drink alcoholic beverages than in ruling that he must not eat impure beef or work in dangerous and unhealthy surroundings. "Those who labour for prohibition," William Jennings Bryan declared, "are helping to create conditions which will bring the highest good to the greatest number without any injustice to any, for it is

not injustice to any man to refuse him permission to enrich himself by injuring his fellowmen.'' To dismiss prohibition as simply a reform that failed is to miss the importance of what occurred to it during the twenties. As an *institutional* reform its impact was significant. In spite of lax and inefficient enforcement, the consumption of alcohol during the nineteen twenties was from 30 to 50 percent lower than it had been during the period 1911–1915. If this was not reflected in the image of the nineteen twenties it was because prohibition had the greatest impact upon the beer-drinking working classes and was least effective among the wealthier professional classes who could afford bootleg liquor and who set much of the tone and style of the decade. Nevertheless, sharply decreased rates of arrests for drunkenness, hospitalization for alcoholism and the incidence of such diseases as cirrhosis of the liver, all attest to the relative effectiveness of the reform.

Prohibition failed in the twenties not because it was institutionally impossible but because it was more than an institutional reform. It was in addition, as Joseph Gusfield has argued so convincingly, a ''symbolic reform'' which gave recognition and legitimacy to the norms and values of rural, Protestant America. It existed as a national symbol of the work habits and morality of the old America; it clearly told every immigrant and every urbanite what it meant to be an American; it attempted to make the American Protestant ideal of the good life national by enshrining it in law. ''The hope of perpetuating our liberties,'' an advocate of prohibition maintained, ''is to help the foreigners correct any demoralizing custom, and through self-restraint assimilate American ideals.'' This cultural imperialism, perhaps even more than the material effects of the reform, infuriated the urban, industrial, immigrant populations who constituted the chief opponents of prohibition. As the decade progressed, prohibition was transformed from a complex reform movement into an essentially cultural crusade which cut through the lines of reform. Increasingly it lost many of its reformist supporters and forged natural alliances with the multitude of other movements which had as their aim the nostalgic reassertion of a fading life style.[6]

The very defensiveness of these movements in the face of the new developments of the twenties forced them into an aggressive posture. Their fears and aspirations were evident in the rhetoric of the Klan's leader, Hiram Wesley Evans, who lamented in 1926 that ''the Nordic American today is a stranger in large parts of the land his fathers gave him.'' Traditional Americans, Evans complained, were beset by confusion and hesitancy ''in sharp contrast to the clear, straightforward purposes of our earlier years.'' They were plagued by futility in religion and a general moral breakdown: ''The sacredness of our Sabbath, of our homes, of chastity, and finally even of our right to teach our own children in our own schools fundamental facts and truths were torn away from us. Those who maintained the old standards

did so only in the face of constant ridicule.'' Robert Moats Miller has argued that the Klan of the twenties was a genuine counterrevolutionary movement. Certainly, under Evans's leadership it sought to combat and defeat the entire host of evils threatening its countrymen. The Klan, Evans warned, would be satisfied with no less than ''a return of power into the hands of the everyday, not highly cultured, not overly intellectualized, but entirely unspoiled and not de-Americanized average citizen of the old stock.''

In the final analysis, however, the movements for which Evans spoke were less counterrevolutionary than defensive; movements on the run which were struggling vainly to stave off the erosion of their cultures and life style—but not at the price of giving up all of the advantages of modernity. It is this that explains why they were so often content with the symbols rather than the substance of power. By the middle of the decade the fundamentalists had begun to stem the tide of the modernist advance within the churches and, through local pressure and intimidation, had made serious inroads upon the teaching of evolution in the schools. But this was not enough. They demanded such statewide laws as the Tennessee Anti-Evolution Act of 1925 not because they really desired to overturn modern education in the states and the nation, but because they craved the comfort of statutory symbols which would settle the question of whose version of the good society was legitimate. The Governor of Tennessee recognized this when, after signing the bill into law, he told the legislature: ''After a careful examination, I can find nothing of consequence in the books now being taught in our schools with which this bill will interfere in the slightest manner. Probably the law will never be applied.'' All that the framers of the bill intended, he insisted, was to lodge ''a distinct protest against an irreligious tendency to exalt so-called science, and deny the Bible in some schools and quarters. . . .''

The extent to which symbols became paramount was manifest in the trauma and fear induced by Al Smith's campaign for the Presidency in 1928. It was not Smith's political programme which in many respects met the economic needs of rural, small-town America better than that of the Republican Party, nor even his Catholicism which activated these feelings, but his urban background, his appeal to the polyglot populations of the big cities, his very speech, dress and manner. Al Smith, the Anti-Saloon League's journal observed, ''is different from any candidate of either party within the knowledge of the present generation. . . . He is not in harmony with the principles of our forefathers.'' The southern Democratic editor George Fort Milton warned that Smith's primary appeal would be to the aliens, the Negroes, the Catholics, the Jews, ''who feel that the older America, the America of the Anglo-Saxon stock, is a hateful thing which must be overturned and humiliated,'' and called upon ''the Old America, the America of Jackson and of Lincoln and Wilson'' to ''rise up in wrath'' and defeat them.

Although the nationalizing and standardizing forces of large-scale industry and the mass-media were more deeply entrenched in the Republican Party of Herbert Hoover, Smith's defeat was greeted with widespread rejoicing. America, the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* announced jubilantly,

> is not yet dominated by its great cities. Control of its destinies still remains in the small communities and rural regions, with their traditional conservatism and solid virtues. . . . Main Street is still the principal thoroughfare of the nation.

IV

Had nostalgia in the nineteen twenties been confined to the national tendency to reassert traditional values and images following the failed prophecies of the First World War and to the past-orientated movements of the culturally alienated, it could be treated as an important force but one still on the periphery of a decade that seemed so dedicated to and enamoured of change. The most pervasive manifestation of nostalgia in the twenties, however, took the form of the ambivalence I discussed at the outset of this essay. In 1914 Walter Lippmann wrote of Woodrow Wilson's "inner contradiction": "He knows that there is a new world demanding new methods, but he dreams of an older world. He is torn between the two. It is a very deep conflict in him between what he knows and what he feels." This inner contradiction ran like a thread throughout the decade.

No one has seen this more perceptively or illustrated it more brilliantly than John William Ward in his study of the reaction to Charles Lindbergh's flight across the Atlantic in 1927. Lindbergh had not been the first to conquer the Atlantic. Almost ten years before his flight a British dirigible had crossed the ocean and in 1919 two planes, one manned by a crew of five and the other with two aboard, repeated the feat. But Lindbergh did it *alone*. ". . . no kingly plane for him," an American bard rhapsodized. "No endless data, comrades, moneyed chums; / No boards, no councils, no directors grim— / He plans ALONE . . . and takes luck as it comes." In a technological age of growing organization, complexity and facelessness, Lindbergh symbolized the self-sufficient individual of the past. Compared with Robinson Crusoe, Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, he was a reminder of America's own uncomplicated beginnings; a product not of the city but of the farm, not of schools and formal training but of individual initiative and self-contained genius.

There was, of course, something jarring in all this. Lindbergh had not been alone. He was enveloped in a plane which was the product of the city, of technology, of organization. In spite of their odes to individualism, Americans really never lost sight of this. Lindbergh himself recognized it when he paid tribute to the industries that had created his plane and entitled the volume describing his flight, *We*. President Coolidge proudly pointed out that over one hundred companies had furnished material and services in the plane's construction. Thus on the other side Lindbergh's flight was recognized as the triumph of modernity. As another American poet put it: "All day I felt the pull / Of the Steel Miracle." In these two reactions Ward has documented one of the basic tensions in American life. The crucial point is that this tension was not merely present in the antithetical reactions of different groups but *within* the responses of the same groups and individuals. Americans were still torn between the past and the future, the individual and society.[7]

It is difficult to find any aspect of American culture in the twenties that did not exhibit this tension. Motion pictures, which came into their own as a popular art form during the decade with 100,000,000 people attending 20,000 theatres weekly by 1926, seem on the surface to have been one long celebration of the new woman, the new morality, the new youth, the new consumption patterns that marked postwar America. Films with such titles as *Forbidden Fruit, Flapper Wives, Week-end Wives, Parlor, Bedroom and Bath, Madness of Youth, Children of Divorce, Modern Maidens, Dancing Mothers, Love Mart* were advertised as featuring "Brilliant men, beautiful jazz babies, champagne baths, midnight revels, petting parties in the purple dawn, all ending in one terrific smashing climax that makes you gasp." The reality fell short of the promises. As uninhibited as they might have been, the movies of the twenties rarely failed to conclude without a justification of the moral standards of the past. Flappers and "It" girls married at the end of the film and entered a life of middle-class respectability. Faithless husbands and wives mended their ways and returned to patient, forgiving mates. The new woman may have been depicted as tough but, as David Robinson has put it, their toughness was used to protect their purity, not to dispose of it. The widespread popular revulsion against the excesses of the first wave of postwar movies forced Hollywood to resort to the cliché of the happy and moral ending; a standard which never marked European movies to the same extent and which made them seem, to movie critics at least, less artificial and more realistic.[8]

The career of Cecil B. DeMille is instructive. After attempting to make the bathroom and bedroom national shrines in his series of postwar sexual comedies, DeMille turned to the public for suggestions for new films. Impressed by the number of requests for religious themes, DeMille hit upon a new formula in his widely popular films, *The Ten Commandments* (1923) and *The King of Kings* (1927). Sex and orgies were still prominent but they were now placed within a religious framework with a moral message. "Better than any other director of the era," Arthur Knight has written of De-

Mille, "he seems to have apprehended a basic duality in his audiences—on the one hand their tremendous eagerness to see what they considered sinful and taboo, and on the other, the fact that they could enjoy sin only if they were able to preserve their own sense of righteous respectability in the process." This was the result not of hypocrisy but of the kind of tension manifest in the response to Lindbergh. Just as Americans could accept the fruits of modern technology only if they could assure themselves that the potency of the individual was enhanced in the process, so they could enjoy the freedom of the new morality only by surrounding it by the verities of the past.

The continued popularity of the comedy film throughout the twenties provided an outlet for the disquiet the decade produced in many Americans. Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, the Keystone Kops, did not celebrate the new age, they satirized it; they did not worship order and stability, they emphasized surrealistic anarchy and mayhem; they did not deify the products of a consumer society, they destroyed them with wilful abandon; they did not bow down to the image and manners of the new middle classes, they parodied them with hilarious accuracy. They focussed not on the strong but on the weak, not on the confident man on the make but on the bewildered man whose direction and goals were uncertain.

Even more indicative of the difficulty Americans had in embracing the new was the increased popularity of the Western film, which reached its classic stage in the twenties. The West continued to be a place of regeneration. In *The Mollycoddle* (1920), a young man brought up amid the decadence and over-civilization of France returned to his native West and regained the latent virility which enabled him to throw off his effete manners and emerge as a hero. Above all, the West continued to be the centre of virtue and morality. The Western heroes of the nineteen twenties—Tom Mix, Buck Jones, Hoot Gibson—were strong, clean-living, uncomplicated men who needed the help of neither institutions nor technology in defeating darkly clad villains and urban scoundrels. They were living embodiments of the innocence, freedom and morality which Americans identified with and longed to regain if only vicariously.

The desire to escape from the complexity of their own time led American moviegoers back beyond the history of their own West. In the immensely popular films of Douglas Fairbanks—*The Mark of Zorro* (1920), *The Three Musketeers* (1921), *Robin Hood* (1922), *The Thief of Bagdad* (1923–24), *Don Q., Son of Zorro* (1925), *The Black Pirate* (1926), *The Gaucho* (1927), *The Iron Mask* (1929)—and in the desert epics of Rudolph Valentino, Americans were transported to a world in which moral issues were clearly delineated and the ability of the individual to influence his own destiny was undiluted by modernity. This search for simplicity accounts also for the surprising success of such anthropological documentary films as *Nanook of the North* (1922) and *Moana* (1926) as well as the literary vogue of Harlem and the fascination with Negro folklore throughout the decade. In these re-creations of Arctic Eskimos, South Sea Islanders, urban and rural blacks, Americans of the twenties were able simultaneously to feel superior to those who lacked the benefits of modern technology and to envy them for their sense of community, their lack of inhibitions, their closer contact with their environment and with themselves.

During the nineteen twenties the newspaper comic strip, like the movies, became a regular feature of American popular culture with tens of millions of readers daily by 1924. Like the movies, too, the comic strip had its anarchic side. *Mutt and Jeff, Bringing Up Father, Abie the Agent, Barney Google, Moon Mullins, Krazy Kat* laughed at propriety, order, romantic love, the sanctity of money and position. It was through the medium of nostalgia rather than satire, however, that the strips had their greatest impact. "If historians of the next century were to rely upon the comic strip," Stephen Becker has written, "they would conclude that we were a peaceful lot of ruminant burghers from 1920 to 1929, with only occasional flashes of inspired insanity, and that our social conflicts and national crises were settled by family conferences at the dinner table." *The Gumps* and *Gasoline Alley*, which first appeared in 1917 and 1919 respectively, were typical of an entire genre of family-centred comic strips which constituted one of the most popular forms of mass culture in the nineteen twenties. The characters inhabiting these strips were distinguished primarily by their lack of distinction: decent, plain-looking, dependable, unexciting, independent but community-orientated people who were destined to live out their lives among neighbours just like themselves. Their very normality, the strips seemed to be saying, made them worth celebrating and emulating. Their virtues were those of the old America and when they strayed from these (for as normal people they had foibles) they were brought to account sharply.

A striking feature of the comic strips of the nineteen twenties was their almost total lack of heroic figures. The central males in *Toots and Casper, Tillie the Toiler, Betty, Fritzi Ritz,* and ultimately *Blondie*, were ineffectual, usually diminutive men whose entire lives revolved around the statuesque, beautiful women for whom the strips were named. It was from their wives or sweethearts (e.g., their present or potential families) that they derived meaning and purpose. The financial tycoon Daddy Warbucks of *Little Orphan Annie* was one of the decade's few prototypes of the incredibly powerful heroes who were to proliferate in the comic strips of the Great Depression. But in spite of the great wealth of her capitalist benefactor, Annie's triumphs in situation after situation were due, more often than not, to her own inner qualities and the innocence, goodness and old-fashioned virtues of the average people who were always on hand to help her. The comic

strips of the nineteen twenties, with their quiet resignation, their emphasis upon steadiness, their celebration of the average, might appear to have been incongruous additions to newspapers whose front pages heralded the new, advertised the spectacular achievements of uncommon men, and called for endless change and progress. But they were a necessary addition, for they comprised the other half of the cultural equation that characterized the United States throughout the decade.[9]

V

This web of ambivalence must be unravelled in order to reveal the meaning of any aspect of American culture in the twenties. Serious artists and musicians attempted to come to terms with modern forms of painting and music at the same time that they were returning to the themes and sources of an earlier America: the art of the Shakers, the Indians and the colonial primitives, in painting; the tribal chants of the Indians, the spirituals of black slaves, the songs of cowboys and the Anglo-American folk, in music. Ernest Hemingway spoke for many members of his literary generation when he recalled that avant-garde Paris was a good place in which to think and write about his native Michigan. During the twenties Americans found it far easier to come to terms with the new if it could be surrounded somehow by the aura of the old.

In their accounts of the "galloping materialism" of the nineteen twenties, historians have made much of the secularization of American religion during the decade and the penchant Americans had for incorporating within the religious message the vulgarizations of American business rhetoric and ideology. The advertising executive Bruce Barton in his best-selling *The Man Nobody Knows* (1925) transformed Jesus into a twentieth-century hustler, "the most popular dinner guest in Jerusalem," who "picked up twelve men from the bottom ranks of business and forged them into an organization that conquered the world." Comparisons like these were ubiquitous but the reasons for them may not be quite as simple as we have assumed. It is entirely possible that modern businessmen were led to this rhetoric not out of supreme confidence in their standards and vocation but, on the contrary, because they were defensive and needed the ideals of Christ to justify and sell themselves to the American people. After announcing his aphorism, "The business of America is business," President Coolidge was quick to add this strained and obviously defensive analogy: "The man who builds a factory builds a temple, the man who works there worships there, and to each is due not scorn and blame but reverence and praise." "Would Isaiah be writing more Bibles if he were here today," Henry Ford asked, and answered self-consciously, "He would probably be gaining experience; living down in the shops among workingmen; working over a set of blueprints; . . . There is no reason why a prophet should not be an engineer instead of a preacher."

Statements like these, when placed beside the rhetoric of businessmen who more often than not sounded like figures out of nineteenth-century McGuffey Readers or Horatio Alger novels, indicate the need American business spokesmen still had for some noble purpose which stretched beyond mere material reward; they continually manifested the inability to accept the practices of modern business and technology purely in terms of practicality and efficiency. When Henry Ford declared, "I am more interested in people than I am in profits. . . . I don't give a hang for money as such, only as it helps me to help people with it," and when Herbert Hoover studded his speeches and writings with such words as "salvation," "devotion," "service," "dedication," "liberty," "vision," "courage," "faith," they were not derided by a cynical, materialistic generation but enshrined as two of the chief icons of America's business civilization. The production techniques of American business in the twenties may have been new, but the images used to justify them were old and hallowed.

To stress the force of nostalgia and the presence of ambivalence is not to deny the realities of change. The desire to have things both ways—to accept the fruits of progress without relinquishing the fundamentals of the old order—explains many of the tensions in American life, but it has never led to complete paralysis. In spite of the persistent lag between actuality and perception, there has been a gradual acceptance of changes and a reordering of desires, expectations and action throughout American history. Americans in the twenties, as before and since, tended to turn to the past in their ideology and rhetoric more than in their actions. Still, the existence of this dualism between a past and future orientation is important for if it has not prevented action it has certainly impeded and shaped it. "The health of a people," Alfred North Whitehead has observed, "depends largely on their ability to question their inherited symbols in light of contemporary actualities, to keep them fluid, vibrant, and responsive." The nineteen twenties had begun with the failure of President Wilson's prophecy concerning the First World War. They were to end with the failure of President Hoover's prophecy that the United States was on the threshold of abolishing poverty and ensuring the promises of the American dream to all its citizens. The confused and ambivalent symbols and images with which the American people emerged from the nineteen twenties made it all the more difficult and painful for them to cope with the material and psychic traumas that lay before them.