

## TWO VIEWS OF AMERICA

SENOR MARIAS, who has travelled and taught in America, here continues the perceptive observations on our country—in a vein remarkably understanding—that began in the last number of MODERN AGE. We expect to publish soon more extracts from his long essay on American life, including his notes on American women.

Dr. Roshwald boldly points out certain ominous failings in American culture; and his criticisms, like those of Tocqueville a century and a quarter ago, are filled with foreboding at the tendency of mass-tastes.

### *American Loneliness and Its Remedies*

JULIAN MARIAS

*Translated by J. Richard Andrews and Joseph H. Silverman*

WE FORGET TOO easily that life is constantly menaced by loneliness: loneliness that lurks behind every corner. But man does pay it heed, at times unknowingly, and tries to ward it off. Half of the things that man has invented are to comfort him in his having to die; the other half, or a bit less, to defend himself from loneliness while he is alive. In Europe, loneliness as a *manner* of life—not as a personal situation which suddenly catches one unawares—is rather infrequent. Why? Europe is too full, and loneliness is, above all, solitude, devastation, emptiness, lack of human company—not just solitude, but solitude with others, solitude among people. Loneliness is, if an extreme definition is wanted, the opposite of the communion of saints. And in a similar way one might understand hell.

But if loneliness occurs only when one is among many, how then can Europe's fullness defend it from loneliness? I for-

got to mention *what* Europe is filled with: it is filled with history, and this means it is filled with the dead. In Europe we have near us, behind us, the innumerable legions of the deceased. Those who have lived before us in the same houses, in the same places. The people of Madrid who lived and died on Pez Street and acclaimed or cursed Espartero; those who went to see La Calderona or gossiped about the latest witticism of Villamediana; those who greeted delicate ladies by touching the brim of their top hats at the Prado; and the past inhabitants of the *Rue du Bac*, who lived again through Balzac; and those collected souls have mellowed with age the *Place des Vosges*; and those who have made the Neapolitan street of Toledo ring through the centuries with their loquaciousness; and those who have walked arm in arm over the myriads of dry leaves, fallen from the chestnut trees along the Neckar.

When we live only with the living, we are alone. And we are easily afflicted by loneliness. That is the case with young countries, new countries, "officially" happy. What a man does to escape from loneliness moves me beyond words. I have known this emotion in the United States, especially in New England. In this part of the world man has struggled to invent remedies against loneliness, probably without knowing it; for example, the smile. Do Americans smile because they are happy? Or in order to be so? To be sure, in order to *look* as if they are, because melancholy is in bad taste, and sadness is quite improper. But in its deepest and most authentic meaning, a smile is the expression of community feeling, the recognition of the existence of a fellow human who should be loved like oneself—or a little less—the expression of conviviality as a blessing.

And in a similar way, another remedy for loneliness is the improvisation of history. It is said that the United States is a "very modern" country, aseptic and atemporal; and it is, some times, as a diversion or a pastime; but when it is a matter of serious living, the American turns determinedly to evoking the past. How "old" everything is! Houses from Colonial days; intense interest in every scrap from the past; nineteenth-century Gothic in colleges, where the sounds of a carillon hover at dusk over lawns like those where William of Ockham strolled, colleges reminding one of Oxford or Cambridge, with their tradition of seven centuries of Latin studies; but it is only Wellesley or, at the most, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

And all the vegetation serves the same purpose as those college lawns. This is the meaning of the verdant delight which surround American cities. Chestnut trees, elms, maples, which turn red in the Fall; trees and shrubs of deep garnet; green or reddish ivy, a climbing calendar which tells the seasons upon brick walls; yellow, blue, purple, and red flowers, cultivated

with care in every open garden, a paradise for everyone. Amidst the greenery and brilliantly colored flowers stand wooden houses, painted white, cream, pink, or better yet, in their time-honored color of aged wood. Where there is no history, or very little, nature is indeed welcome; nature lovingly enriched by culture; I mean by culture in its original form, by agriculture. The entire city is alive; it trembles with the passing of the wind; it keeps us company with its foliage; it smiles with the sun blinking among the leaves; it greets us with its habitual fragrance of freshly cut grass; or it surprises us with the unexpected perfume of snowdrops in bloom. This vegetation corresponds to . . . old stones. It exerts the same tonic effect as a stroll along the Segovian street of La Muerte y la Vida (Death and Life), or under the whimsical arches of San Juan de Duero, and the Romanesque Torre de la Antigua, or the Toledan Cobertizos, where a little lamp burns and where there is always a hint of flirtations or mystery. Beside the Tagus or the Pisuerga, the Seine or the Isere, the Hudson or the Charles, by means of granite or green plants, one always seeks to hide his soul from that implacable enemy of this world, loneliness.

I remember my arrival in Salt Lake City on a long shining train which had just crossed the endless plains of Illinois, Iowa, Nebraska, Wyoming, and now had entered the land of the Mormons. When I got off the train and began to walk down the long avenue, now slick with ice, which stretches from the station to the Mormon Temple, I asked myself what I had lost in Utah, in this place where I didn't even know the name of a single person. Undoubtedly the blame was this time—as in so many other cases—Jules Verne's. Do you remember his "Around the World in Eighty Days?" Phineas Fogg, the phlegmatic gentleman, and his roguish servant Passepartout; in their company I came to know Utah and its Mormons for the first time, in my early youth. But let's

not deceive ourselves: youth somehow remains with us; I had a date with Salt Lake City from the age of ten, and now I was keeping it, walking slowly through the snow along a deserted street, toward the Mormon Temple, which glowed in the distance, and which can only be entered by the faithful.

This enormous temple, brightly lighted, seemed to orient and give meaning to the city. Very close by, the mountains, which surround the city and are visible on all sides, creating in its midst the image of a wild West. Frozen and almost deserted streets. And suddenly, the drugstore! There, in Salt Lake City, I finally understood its meaning. Always open, day and night, in any weather, brilliantly lit up like a beacon in the middle of the night, sheltering and hospitable like a port, full of things . . . like a drugstore, for in no other place are there so many things. Twenty-five-cent books on revolving wire stands; children's records; magazines and newspaper; cigarettes, cameras, candies, luggage, electrical appliances, chairs, pens, toys, glasses, perfumes, stationery fishing tackle . . . anything you can think of. Since it has everything, there are even drugs and prescriptions in the American drugstore. And there is, strangely enough, a large counter, lined with plastic-covered stools, where one can order, at any hour of the day or night, and for a few cents, a couple of eggs, a cup of coffee, a milk shake, a hamburger, or what they call, with wonderful inventiveness, a cheeseburger.

If you want to buy something in the United States, don't give it a second thought. An alarm clock? Don't look for a watchmaker, because you may not find one, or he may not sell alarm clocks. Go to the corner drugstore. Do you need a pipe, a roll of film, a hot plate, a life preserver, some stamps, a bath sponge, a toaster, an atlas, a filet of salmon, an aspirin, chocolate or strawberry ice cream, a coonskin cap? Do you want to call Miami, Chicago, Columbus, the most remote town in Minnesota or in Arizona?

Walk confidently into the drugstore. Do you want to thaw out and warm your ears? Do you want to breathe cool air when outside heat has melted the asphalt? The drugstore makes life livable again.

And, above all, if you need company, if you feel alone, estranged, and detached from everything, if it seems to you that there is no one left in the world, that humanity has disappeared from around you, you will find it again in the drugstore. It is always the same, always identical; it is yours. You will find it in Niagara Falls, near the Canadian border; and in California, on the shores of the Pacific; in the small, intimate cities of Connecticut or Massachusetts, and on the plains of Wisconsin; in the bustle of Chicago, and very near the gardens which surround Pasadena's millionaires. When you cross its threshold, you enter into the same socially shared world, you are "at home". Behind the counter the same smile that you left behind in your own city awaits you. From the stools, a complex sampling of humanity looks at you benevolently: a boy and a girl who are drinking a shake and looking into each other's eyes, while she straightens her blond hair; the nurse who pauses on her way to the hospital for a cup of hot coffee; the solitary night owl who doesn't know where to go; the truck driver who gulps down his bacon and eggs while his gas tank is being filled; the lady who is out shopping and, surrounded by packages, eats a quick bite. Perhaps the counter is circular, or forms three sides of a square: the people face each other and smile; there is a smell of coffee; cigarette smoke curls upwards; a few words are exchanged; an old man cleans his glasses in order to see three generations more clearly.

The drugstore is a refuge, a haven for the weary, a source of diversion for the curious and contemplative, a consolation for the afflicted and lonely. In a big city, its lights beckon and call; in small, quiet towns, when everyone is asleep, it accepts the stranger who feels lost. How

many charitable deeds the American drugstore performs unknowingly! It feeds the hungry, it refreshes the thirsty, at times it clothes the naked, it visits the nostalgic, it consoles the sad, it teaches the uninformed with its books and gives advice for those who need it. How many on their way to commit a crime, perhaps to

murder or to take their own life, may have found a drugstore in their path and have changed their minds? In this country of statistics, one figure is lacking: the would-be suicides who had a change of heart in the drugstore and became reconciled to life. They ought to send a postcard to the census office.

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## Quo Vadis, America?

MORDECAI ROSHWALD

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A MAN BORN in another land seldom looks upon the present place of his residence as the native-born do. The detachment required for criticism of a nation is more easily found by an alien, especially if he has not resided for a great while in the country concerned.

With this apologetic preamble, I embark on some reflections provoked by the first six months of my visit to the United States. I shall try to put my observations candidly, even at the risk of offending sensibilities. Nor shall I try to describe those facets of American life that seem to be salutary: there is no need to praise health.

What I say here is neither a judge's verdict nor a scientist's finding. I present only hypotheses. These may be confirmed or refuted by longer observation. But I advance them now in the belief that certain issues must be raised before intelligent discussion can proceed. It is easier to evaluate a dead culture than a living. Yet the criticism of a living civilization nurtures that culture; to withhold such criticism is to reduce that society's vitality. In order to endure, a civilization must invite constant criticism. This criticism may be offered by an outsider; but it should be absorbed by the people within. Mine may be the hypotheses; the Americans should do the job of examining their veracity, and thereby examining themselves.

2

David Riesman, in his *Faces in the Crowd*, expresses the opinion that in contemporary America appear adumbrations of a society which he ventures to call *other-directed*.<sup>1</sup> Riesman writes,

"In the place of lifelong goals toward which one is steered as by a gyroscope, the other-directed person obeys a fluctuating series of short-run goals picked up (to continue with metaphor) by a radar . . . the parents and other adults encourage the child to tune to the people around him at any given time and share his preoccupation with their reactions to him and his to them."<sup>2</sup>

The meaning of this is that people tend to adjust their behaviour to other people's likings and opinions, and disregard their own opinions, tastes, moral standards—in fact, do not try to elaborate a point of view of their own. If a whole society lives according to such an unprincipled principle, there is bound to develop a laxness in aesthetic, moral, and cultural standards that verges on a spiritual anarchy (which may take the shape of acquiescent uniformity). If Riesman is right in his diagnosis about these tendencies in some parts of American society, his term "other-directed" is a much too mild an adjective for the description of the individual character and of the social phenomenon he has in mind.