

# THE AMERICAN TEMPERAMENT

BY ALAIN LOCKE

IT is a curious but inevitable irony that the American temperament, so notorious for its overweening confidence and self-esteem, should be of all temperaments least reflective, and for all its self-consciousness, should know itself so ill. When criticised, it is either perplexed or amused; when challenged, apologetically boastful, and seemingly delights in misconception and misrepresentation. A striking instance of this singular trait is the way Americans abroad exaggerate their native mannerisms and become veritable caricatures of themselves in good-natured mimicry of the national type. In its extreme form the tendency might be characterized as living up to a libel to save the trouble and expense of legal proceedings. Whether this be due to a sort of mistaken chivalry or to mere childish irresponsibility is as hard to determine as it is unnecessary;—either is reprehensible. There is in this dependence upon foreign opinion something of a native shrewdness for judging others by their opinion of oneself, but much more is to be attributed to an instinctive aversion from the pangs of introspection and a childish capacity for using other people as mirrors. No other nation, perhaps, has played so sensational a rôle, but no other nation has stood so in need of its audience. The histrionic demeanor of Americans abroad, at times so very like the behavior of actors off the stage, exacting calcium-light duty of the sun, is a real clue to the national temperament. If only by the reactions of others do we achieve any definite notion of what we ourselves are, it is small wonder that we have cultivated the actor's manner and practise his arts, only it is a strange art for an otherwise inartistic nation, a curious dependence for a free people.

That a people by theory and instinct so individualistic should believe at all in a national character and should be

so obviously content with a composite portrait is, indeed, marvellous. With its history and traditions, America might quite logically have repudiated any such thing as a national temperament and have rid itself of this inveterate superstition of the journalist and the patriotic orator. The demagogue picks his following from the worshippers of this idol of the tribe; and the early republican fathers, who were philosophical Democrats, feared and detested both. It is due to their heroic efforts that the idea has still so little content and so few traditions to take root in, but America of the present day insists on the national type: it has cultivated it most successfully and believes in it most instinctively and whole-heartedly.

Society is quite at the mercy of the class that paints its portrait, and it has been no credit to us that ours has been the hasty evocation of journalists and cartoonists in league with the publicist, rather than the careful creation of novelists and artists in their hereditary conspiracy to make the best representative. With us, as with other industrial civilizations, the national loyalties grow out of individual prosperity and success, and the bond between the individual and the impersonal or corporate interests is very strong and immediate. But the same ideal loyalty to a national character and belief in a national will and destiny, which promote the industrial arts, promote, under favorable circumstances, the reflective and representative arts, and make for that sense of institutions, which, beginning in jingo patriotism, ends in sound traditions. And as containing the promise of all this, the current idea of the American temperament is worthy of some serious analysis and deliberate propaganda.

The democratic and individualistic tone of modern living will no longer allow a class product to be foisted on it as an expression of the national life and ideal as has so often before been the case. America is wise, after all, in preferring to remain artless and unenlightened rather than accept contemporary art as a serious expression of itself. Drawn by detached and almost expatriated aesthetes at the commands of the most disinterested class of art patrons ever in existence, it has no real claims except upon the curiosity of the people. To force an art first to digest its civilization in all its crude lumpiness is, after all, a good and sound procedure, and it is safe to prophesy that in America

either the result will be representative and unique or that there will emerge no national art at all.

America, indeed, in the construction of the American temperament, is producing her first immaterial or art product. One only wishes there was more conscious art in the process. At all events, there has developed a national character so unique that it is the despair of critics, and yet so simple and available that to acquire it one only need live in America. Even the English and Chinese ambassadors assume it for a while, and what is more significant, the emigrant, Slavic, Teutonic, Irish or of the Romance stocks, acquires it and becomes an American spiritually before he has resided long enough to be naturalized. And in certain instances he becomes so even in retaining strong hereditary national and racial characteristics. His children are "born Americans." Against many foreign critics it must be maintained that this is something more than the assumption of a certain commercial-mindedness and personal self-assertiveness everywhere recognized as American. Certain temperaments quite without these traits, notably the American negro, participate to a remarkable degree in the American temperament. In last analysis, it is a mental atmosphere as unavoidable and free as air, and this, to my thinking, characterizes it as something spiritual, as being free, accessible, contagious. On festival days we are tempted to think of it as something political, and to make it a matter of the Constitution and the Declaration of Rights. Oftener still do we think of it as a sense of social partnership and corporate prosperity of a commercial type or industrial, at least, in its manifestations. But it is really a very limited and simple system of conventional ideas, associated with certain very contagious but superficial mannerisms whose only justification is that as a light but strong social harness it works so well. How shallow and contentless it is as an idea or how indefensible and inadequate as a code, fortunately only philosophical historians realize. At present the pragmatic verdict must prevail; it works quickly, effectively, as a bond between men and, under the circumstances, seems to them less tyrannous than a convention of forms, permitting of the almost unhindered exercise of that personal initiative and freedom which an American calls his individuality.

It is a unique thing,—this American sort of individualism, perhaps even a transitory thing, and one feels that it alone

is the cause of such theoretical antinomies working in actual practice. An American's idea of himself, though highly personal, is not fixed; it is really Protean and even puerile. How it claims everything and yet refuses to identify itself permanently with anything. Criticise the American for any trait intimately personal or nationally characteristic, and he will evade the thrust by insisting that you have not touched a vital spot, though perhaps mortally wounded. It is like rebuking a child for one of his moods; he changes it, and you cannot hold him to account for the submerged personality, the discarded rôle. The American temperament is histrionic as the healthy child; its naïve individuality is unquestionable, and because it is so plastic it knows no self-contradiction.

But to portray Americans as heroic children will seem unwarranted to those who know the drawn-faced and tense-lipped features of our fellow countrymen: surely these people do not look young or irresponsible. America's superb boyishness does threaten to succumb to the undue responsibilities it has taken upon itself in overconfidence. But that overconfidence is youthful, youthful to a fault.

It must be remembered that America, though an amalgam of peoples, is of the Anglo-Saxon stock in mental characteristics, and that it has taken upon itself what may be the final experiment in the Anglo-Saxon type of civilization. More reflective and calculating peoples are inclined to count the costs and experiment by proxy. Among these people a leisure class arises and paints a national character at its leisure, an ideal portrait that men cherish retrospectively and read into the whole life of the people who supported the leisure class. Individualism and a certain self-willed energy has possessed us, and that with fury in the American temperament, and the modern demand for material progress is the result. If we are to credit this tendency with an ultimate goal, it must aim at securing a final and restful mastery over the means of life. In this experiment America is at present engrossed, and the result is likely to justify or repudiate the whole idea;—at least in the eyes of others who are following more cautiously and with less conviction. One sometimes fears that in event of failure, the American temperament will become the scapegoat of many nations and bear the blame of a second Babel. The true American disposition is, however, careless of the end; it neither wants

nor anticipates leisure, and cheerfully and without sense of loss waives what the forefathers thought a primary right of man, the pursuit of happiness as an end in itself. It is even a question whether American opinion will tolerate for any considerable time a leisure class devoted to this end, or a leisure class of any sort, so prepared is the American temperament to dispense with the reflective arts and all those posthumous satisfactions, dear to past civilizations, of leaving behind it adequate records and imposing traditions.

Indeed, the real uses of leisure still seem to be below our mental horizon. The second generation succeeds the first and seems intent on discovering whether or not the pursuit of material progress is really endless. This is quite to be expected of a people who have not as yet made any real distinction between work and play, and who have acquired no interests for impersonal pursuits. Most of all do we dislike the person who has aged prematurely through contact with older traditions, the impersonal observer, the onlooker who merely comments; we contrive to eliminate or ignore him as children do grown-ups. One can see why we should, for introspection and reflection are the arch enemies of our dearest illusions. To them our politicians are irresponsible demagogues, our captains of industry merely capricious experimenters, our teachers intellectual sophists, our legislators social extemporizers, our clergymen moral improvisers, and our writers adroit apologists. And so they may, indeed, appear to us later; but now the make-believe is upon us and for us they are not. It is to be hoped that when they come to be matters of history, they will be found to have harmed their contemporaries most, and to have committed fewer crimes against the future than any other active generation of men.

The greatest anomaly of the American temperament is its evasiveness. No one knows what organ it inhabits or can define "the people of the United States" in whose name so much is perpetrated. An astute Frenchman, coming from a country that really possesses a social mind if any country does, accuses America of not having that organic sense called "public opinion." "I hardly discern a national consciousness," he says, "only everywhere a national self-consciousness." Our journalism is a sad witness of this fact; public opinion is too plastic to mould; it runs in rivers and tidal eddies. To record its variations and

predict it for short periods is the barometric function of our whole press.

Yet there is on any great occasion, and there issues from any real crisis, political or social, a well-formulated public opinion, terse, simple, emphatic, often already patched into catch-words and phrases, which run from mouth to mouth and are on everybody's tongue at once. We act almost automatically and, consequently, spasmodically as well. There is at the time such unanimity of opinion that no one, parties with traditional policies, institutions with hereditary traditions, even men with fixed principles—none—will think of denying the popular will. Public opinion in America asserts itself violently, impulsively, and more often than in any other country perhaps, accomplishes its immediate aims and demands, owing to the plastic and tentative nature of our institutions and ideas. But once asserted, it does not maintain itself, or if it must maintain itself, does so grudgingly, with a sense of restraint and handicap. This is the price of our amenability to reform.

Peculiarly characteristic in this respect is the national will in any moral issue. Only at times of the greatest tension is the popular mind in sight of principles: the Civil War and its reactions are incontrovertible witnesses of this. So forgetful, except at rare moments, is the national consciousness that it cannot understand or sanction its own actions when involved in the inevitable reaction. Historical-mindedness and patience while the natural equilibrium is re-establishing itself are two traits, most lacking and most needed, in the American temperament.

America is certainly, of all countries, least politically minded. Its politics are a professional game played by professionals,—in all senses of the word it is to be deplored,—for the amateurish amusement and approval of the public. Exactly to what this is due is a very great puzzle. Perhaps it is an American trust and belief in experts, a trait which in our whole life exacts from us more unquestioning reverence for authority and greater faith in delegated power than we are given credit for. The autocratic possibilities of our nominally democratic institutions are only lately beginning to reveal this essential and deeply lodged strain in the American character. A country that worships power, respects the autocrat, and may even come to tolerate the tyrant. Indeed, the analogies between the republican temper of

Rome and that of America may well worry those who believe that history repeats itself. Recent attempts against the capitalist have proved that such a type is too representative of the ideals of the common ordinary man to be attacked without a sense of self-contradiction and injury.

Such facts bring us within range of the important discovery that American democracy is not a political theory, but a social instinct. As patriotism, it is sheer rhetoric, bombastic and effusive; as a deep conviction, it is almost religious in its intensity and individual hold upon every citizen. It differs from other continental forms of patriotism in being so associated with the personal and individual well-being of each man, and in having slight reference either to a national past or future. There is little of reflective pride, that grave and historic achievement of the English temperament, and strangely little of a definite notion about the national purpose and destiny. America is too engrossed with the present to have anything but empty and boastful claims upon the future. The sense of power and prosperity, the sense of aggregate power and prosperity, quite opposite to the selfish and individual satisfactions so often charged to the American temperament, is at the very bottom of the national character and is the root of its patriotism.

One can account for the presence of this corporate feeling in closely knit and socially compact groups, or in the country where one racial stock or predominant institution supplies a coercive feeling of kinship and unity. But in America, a land of startling divergencies and instinctive antipathies, it is difficult to explain. Neither as a carelessness or indifference to these contrasts, nor as democratic tolerance, nor even as theoretical or practical humanitarianism, can one account for the American sense of fellowship. It is due to an acute responsiveness, an intellectual sensitiveness, that are born of insatiable curiosity and a surplus of individual energy.

To such a temperament nothing is really trivial, and the points of contact between things are almost infinite. As soon as one examines this trait on an intellectual plane, one sees what curious laws of association govern the American mind. Its superb eclecticism, its voraciousness, its collector's instinct for facts and details, and its joyous disregard for proportion and an artificial order are still in need of adequate exposition. They impose so many handicaps

from an artistic point of view that as yet no literary genius except Whitman has found it possible to accept them all. The temperament is, however, extensively catered for: the informational press is its creature. To instruct pleasantly and with the minimum of effort is the debased aim of present-day art; a wide-spread and ever-growing disease of taste of which America produced the germ. The informational short-story, the character sketch, the photographic novel, the popular encyclopædia, the unscientific travel study, and the whole pictorialization of literature and art can be traced to American initiation and patronage. A strange survival of Puritanism,—for the American temperament is still profoundly Puritan,—this idea of art and letters as the handmaids of knowledge, serving in bond to the insatiable curiosity of men. A Republican and utilitarian art, however, is generally short-lived, though we may expect a longer vogue for the contemporary information-monger than that enjoyed by his predecessor, the political pamphleteer. There are even now in America signs of reaction against an impersonal art, and a return to the lyric and dramatic motives. At present the reaction is, unfortunately, at the same time a revulsion from the national idea and temperament.

Thus the only justification America has yet had comes direct from the self-satisfaction of the individual American. His satisfaction, however, is both unmistakable and voluble. He is content, though the competition becomes daily more severe and evident. He is beginning to realize now that many are handicapped at the very outset, that the struggle is prolonged by the stronger for the sheer joy of conquest, and even that a good third of the energy expended is consumed in piling up success on the top of victory. Yet a cheerful acceptance of the situation is the price of his individuality, his optimism, and his chance of winning out, and he pays it ungrudgingly. There is a greater measure of content and less of a sense of environmental injustice in America than anywhere else in the world to-day. And the principles of conduct and social relationships, though elemental, are like the rules of a game, there is an immediate appeal to public censure or approval, and little discrepancy between theory and practice. Naturally our theories suffer when compared with idealistic and more divorced codes. Where every man is supposed to consider his own interests, no social blame is imputed, and no one, except for initial

handicaps, has an excuse. That is not, on the whole, an unenviable state of affairs: the American temperament only approximates it. As an instinctive theory, this is what it believes in.

Yet with us, with every man theoretically for himself, public spiritedness prevails to a marked and unusual degree. For every man drives a frank bargain with the community; there is a competitive and open market for altruistic wares. Consider for a moment that phenomenon of our civilization, the millionaire philanthropist. Is he an enigma, this person who has seemed to change character and tactics under our very eyes? By no means: if Americans worship money, they worship it as power, as cornered energy and not in an intrinsic and miserly way. The time comes when the force he has been collecting threatens to vanish in latent inertia as it were, and the millionaire can only release it again by giving. The process of accumulation, becoming automatic, discharges him; he takes to his new vocation of giving, but as far as the muscular reactions are concerned there is very little difference between shovelling in and shovelling out. The community in giving social rewards of a very specious sort in exchange seems quite to have the better of the bargain. But it should not be deluded into thinking that the millionaire has really changed character, and that it is fostering altruistic pursuits.

Somehow, in the end, the American temperament exacts what it needs most, the attitude of suspended judgment. But self-analysis is not necessarily fatal, and if it is too early to make up our minds as to what we are, or, better, what we intend to be, surely it is time to rid ourselves of the delusion that we already know both. As long as the American temperament remains its own sole excuse for being, one cannot expect it to be humble and unassertive, but one may point to the need for self-analysis and expression. The materials at hand are, it is true, a stupendous handicap, so unsuitable that at times one fears that nothing can be produced so wholly vital and unique and interesting as the national character itself.

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