THE BOURGEOIS SPIRIT IN AMERICA: BY
GRACE LATIMER JONES

RECENTLY, while staying at an inn, I met each day
at dinner a young woman who is an instructor in
English at a provincial college in Ohio. I remarked
to her one day that there seemed to me to be no live
creative force in late English and American literature.
She met the criticism with indignation. "I think,"
she answered, "that we have a grand literature."
Some days later she observed, "I read once in an art journal that
one should try every day to impress something beautiful on one's
memory. I had not thought of it before, but ever since I have made
a point of finding something beautiful each day, and of remembering
it. I find this an excellent idea."

This attitude seems to me typical of that of many men and women
in the United States who call themselves "cultivated." It is, I
suspect, the attitude which causes the European to dub us, with
some contempt, a "bourgeois nation." The exact meaning of this
criticism is difficult to state. It implies that as a nation we lack
not the facts that make for education, but rather the graces that
follow from education. It implies that the appreciative, the aesthetic
element, is lacking in Americans. Many of us, like the young teacher,
follow some recipe for culture which we read in an art journal,
and "find the idea excellent." Our culture is so self-conscious!
We do not understand that the very essence of culture is an unsought,
almost sub-conscious perception of some beautiful thing which at once
becomes an integral part of one's life—but is never "remembered."
The attempt of the young woman to "acquire culture"—laudable
though it may be—is typically bourgeois.

And bourgeois, it seems to me—by which I mean, lacking in true
aesthetic appreciation—the mental development of most Americans
is. And yet I am not at all willing to admit that the American nature
is essentially and necessarily bourgeois. The American is bourgeois
because his institutions are for the most part bourgeois, and because
he is ignorant of anything else—he does not know or understand
what culture is.

The blame for this is usually given to our educational system.
The mechanical part of education, critics say, is well accomplished,
especially is our lower schools. Here children learn to spell, to
multiply, to parse, with amazing rapidity. Yet in spite of this,
assert the critics, our schools do not develop children intellectually—
not even to the extent that this was done at an earlier time. The
foundation is laid for the successful bookkeeper and stenographer. Real mental growth is not fostered. Already in high schools the deficiency is felt. Philosophers and poets and gentlemen are not being trained. In our universities there is no genuine scholarship, no love and appreciation of intellectual attainment among the students. And yet any discerning teacher can, I think, point out several students whom, for lack of a better term, I shall call appreciative. They are not as a rule those pupils who take highest rank in grades. The instructors are well aware, and occasionally the students are themselves dimly conscious of the fact, that there is no recognition of this quality of mind in our educational régime. Students gain degrees and honors only for a definite tangible amount of work done.

But the fault is not confined to our schools and colleges. In the whole of American society one finds little true intellectuality, little appreciation of and love for the higher emotions and activities of the soul, which are so little recognized as to have no name in our everyday language, and so are very difficult to speak or write of. And furthermore, I believe that not only do these high qualities of soul not exist to any wide extent in America, but also that they are not to any great extent desired by the American people, who do not in general understand that anything wider and better than "book knowledge" is to be had in the educational field. Now book knowledge is all very well in its way. There are people who make a specialty of information, and these are to be commended as is a specialist in any more restricted field. A knowledge of facts is always useful and is often a source of great delight. But a knowledge of facts is by no means the whole of education, although in some quarters the two are thought identical.

America is a nation of men and women of affairs. We are energetic and active. We would be up and doing, and would at any cost avoid the epithet "lazy." Those who have no business make a brave show of doing something by making a business of fads and amusements. In activity of almost every sort we have outdone the rest of the world. But our leisure—what can be said of our leisure? The truth is that we have never tried leisure, we do not know what it is. It has been variously called idleness, amusement, time put into no profit. It is none of these. Leisure, it seems to me, is the opportunity of following one's bent and inclination as and when one chooses, without meeting with any effective resistance.

Now, although we are a nation of doers, I think most of us would choose to have given us now and then a few hours of repose, and the
way in which one would spend these hours would be a rough indication of one's intellectual and cultural attainment. Obviously the time might be spent in innumerable ways—in conversation, reading, study, writing, in music, painting, weaving, embroidery, or other crafts, in games, in smoking, in dreaming, or in mere idling. Of Americans it is true in the main that they do not know how to spend these quiet hours pleasurably, and that of all things they avoid solitude, when "time hangs heavy on their hands" when "there is nothing to do." People without mental culture do indeed find time heavy on their hands with nothing to do. So they avoid these hours as best they may, and wonder how bookish, intellectual people endure life.

We have in America no widespread intellectual class declaring its devotion to the intellectual emotions, aiming to further aesthetic interest. There are intellectual persons, intellectual families, small intellectual communities. But a class—no. On no question, public or otherwise, can it be said, "the 'intellectuals' think thus." The "intellectuals" are not a class honored or despised. They have no voice in public opinion. They stand for no broad humane or literary interest. They cannot give their support or approval to any school of art, music, drama, or poetry, because they have no esprit de corps. The people of the country do not and perhaps cannot conceive of an intellectual class because they have so little idea what an intellectual person is. They do not know men and women who feel and delight in the fine emotions of the soul. Such a one, it seems to them, could be but a bookish curiosity, with about as much life and blood as a veritable book-moth. What can he know of the world of affairs and realities?

So little, indeed, are these emotions and joys of the mind perceived and recognized, that those who feel them vaguely and are much shut off from others who have the same experience, speak of them charily and blushingly, as if they spoke sacrilegiously. So seldom do we refer to them, that it is usually by some fine instinct that we discover their existence in others. Certain it is, that as one recognizes them more and more in oneself, others perceive them in one more and more. Those who look find their sign in faces, in a mere presence, in ways of speech, between the lines of formal correspondence, in the choice of a bit of color.

"But these finer emotions," I hear some one ask, "what are they? How does one feel them? How does one satisfy them?" It is a difficult question. The emotion has many forms, many means of
THE BOURGEOIS SPIRIT IN AMERICA

satisfaction. I might suggest that it is sometimes the love of nature, as this is felt by the soul refined by knowing nature itself and by having absorbed and realized much that has been sung and painted and thought of nature by others. It may be, too, a similar intelligent appreciation of a sonata or of a picture. It is sometimes the thrill that accompanies a thought which comes to one alone—a very simple synthesis, perhaps, arising from one’s everyday experience, which may fade from one’s recollection, leaving the memory of only the thrill behind. So one is thrilled when one reads the thoughts one has never had—though they are so simple! And a joy follows too when one comes on what one thought long ago, and had forgotten; or when one finds one’s modest ideas in the wisdom of the ancients. In a book or conversation one follows with another the strange winding paths of subtle human experience, comparing and agreeing, finding joy in the companionship. A wonderful sense of mystery gathers as one proceeds, and perhaps one loses oneself for the time in one of those vague emotional states sought for and lauded by the religious mystics. Indeed, this phase of life is very closely akin to the religious life. In some natures the two are identical. Whether or not they coincide, or touch, or either exists to the exclusion of the other, is a matter of education, of the relation of one’s ideas to one another, of one’s emotional experience. The emotions themselves, their results, are very like.

Mr. Benson, in his essay on “Books,” has well pictured this side of life. “The mood has,” he says, “little of precise acquisition or definite attainment about it; it is a desire rather to feed and console the spirit—to enter the region in which it seems better to wonder than to know, to aspire rather than to define, to hope rather than to be satisfied. A spirit which walks expectantly along this path grows to learn that the secret of such happiness as we can attain lies in simplicity and courage, in sincerity and loving kindness; it grows more and more averse to material ambitions and mean aims; it more and more desires silence and recollection and contemplation. . . . . Such a mood need not withdraw us from life, from toil, from kindly relationships, from deep affections; but it will rather send us back to life with a renewed and joyful zest, with a desire to discern the true quality of beautiful things, of fair thoughts, of courageous hopes, of wise designs.”

Such, then, is the life that I am exalting. It is a delicate, an intelligent appreciation of and joy in art, in music, in drama, in each and every form of beauty. It is, too, an intelligent and sympathetic
recognition of the good and the true in these. This attitude softens and sweetens life in all its aspects; it gives the mind poise; the soul, peace. And this is the phase of living so little known in America even by individuals, that it has no recognition whatever as one of the necessary elements in the life of a modern, civilized, educated nation. Every means by which this side of life expresses itself points to the truth of my assertion—the character of most of the books that have large sales, of dramas that attract large crowds; the lack of popular interest in the best music and art and architecture. Culture, civilization, is not measured, as it is to be feared some think, by the number of individuals in a nation who can read and write. As I have already said, I feel that the bourgeois attitude in America is not due to a fundamental deficiency in appreciation, but rather to a stone-blind ignorance in most communities of the emotional and spiritual value of culture. The statement made by those in authority that a university aims at "culture" as well as the teaching of facts has more than once brought discredit on the A. B. of the institution.

But what of the youth of our country who have yearnings for the intellectual emotions—if I may continue to use so psychologically contradictory a phrase? In most lower schools this aspect of education is completely disregarded. There is no time for it. It does not "count" for anything. In college likewise—there is no time for it. The students' study hours are filled with the scramble of "getting over the ground." The healthy youth must have some hours of physical exercise, and there is the "college life" too to be lived, a truly valuable experience, which may contain in itself some of the most important elements of culture. What with meal hours, and sleep hours, and sundry other hours, all taken together, the sum is already more than twenty-four.

Well, you say, what are we going to do about it? Are we to introduce a course in appreciation, a laboratory course in aesthetcism into our educational system? I have no formula for the solution of the problem. I would, however, have those who teach, and more especially those who are taught, cherish in themselves the moments or hours of appreciation of the subtler experiences of life, to wait patiently, and watch diligently for the token of these in others, and not to be discouraged if they do not find it often; and even though they never find it, to preserve those moments in their own souls. Such experiences give one a sociability and sense of comradeship with, an interest in, oneself, that is invaluable.

These experiences are not, however, without their dangers. At
A WATCH IN THE NIGHT

best this is but one side of living. One may indulge oneself to excess in the finer exercises of the soul, and lose thereby one's ruggedness. One may become, as many of the mystics became, nerveless, and sentimental, and maudlin, and even degenerate. In some places in Europe—in Oxford, in Paris—the higher life grows on its native soil, and there one may best find it in its degeneracy and vice, as in its flowering beauty. We are after all primarily animals, and we have need always of the sterner qualities of life—courage, and pluck, and cheerfulness, and energy. If we are quite clean and healthy, these virtues are likely to take care of themselves. This other virtue, however, of which I have been speaking, needs to be fostered and tenderly kept alive if one lives, as most Americans do live, among people who have not large experience in the finer intellectual emotions. What could be better if, to the old-time American sturdiness, purity, and robustness, we might add these rarer qualities of soul?

A WATCH IN THE NIGHT

EVERY night—I know not when—
I waken soft from sleep,
And look out on the summer night
That seems a watch to keep,
And for a while I lie awake—
And feel a part of flower or tree,
Or floating cloud, or anything,
The cricket chirping, or the little bird
That rousing, takes its head out from its wing
And chirps a drowsy little song, then sleeps again.
And so it comes about I understand
A great deal that the trees say, and the stars;
And oftentimes it seems to me
That I rest better in that hour I am awake
Then all the seven I am sound asleep.

Isabella Howe Fiske.