

the american genteel tradition in the early twentieth century

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In 1911 the philosopher and poet George Santayana observed a basic dichotomy in American culture and fashioned a satirical phrase for one of its aspects that was soon to be used as a blunt weapon with which a new generation would commit intellectual patricide—or more accurately matri-cide—against its progenitors.

America is not simply . . . a young country with an old mentality: it is a country with two mentalities, one a survival of the beliefs and standards of the fathers, the other an expression of instincts, practice and discoveries of the younger generations. In all the higher things of the mind—in religion, in literature, in the moral emotions—it is the hereditary spirit that still prevails. . . . The truth is that one-half of the American mind, that not occupied intensely in practical affairs, has remained, I will not say high-and-dry, but slightly becalmed; it has floated gently in the backwater, while, alongside, in invention and industry and social organization the other half of the mind was leaping down a sort of Niagara Rapids. . . . The one is the sphere of the American man; the other, at least predominantly, of the American woman. The one is all aggressive enterprise; the other is all genteel tradition.¹

An examination of the *Atlantic Monthly* magazine between 1909 and 1919 suggests that Santayana spoke a good deal of truth. The *Atlantic* at this time represented at least an important segment of American culture. Since

its founding in 1857 under the editorship of James Russell Lowell, it had seen itself and been widely recognized as a leading exponent of high culture in the American republic. Between 1909 and 1919, under the editorship of Ellery Sedgwick, it maintained its tone of cultural authority, showed a renewed interest in political and social issues, and achieved a national circulation of about 100,000. While its contents were essentially similar to those of the “quality magazines” with somewhat larger circulations such as *Harper’s* or *The Century*, Henry May suggests that the *Atlantic* reflected a somewhat more liberal range of contemporary thought.² An analysis of the magazine around the time of Santayana’s comment reveals that the articles on “practical affairs”—on politics, economics and most facets of public life—were written exclusively by men, and often by men actively engaged in the events of which they wrote. The range of attitudes expressed in these articles was broad, but their general tenor was moderately liberal, even progressive. By contrast, the range of attitudes typically expressed by writers on culture, morals, manners, literature and “the interior life” was notably more constricted, while the general tone of these writers was conservative and retrospective. Writing on these subjects was dominated by women, most of whom belonged definitively to Santayana’s “genteel tradition.” These women generally formed a majority—and often a large majority—among the authors of both fiction and poetry in the *Atlantic*. Until 1917, they wrote all of the semiannual literary reviews. And although the United States’ entry into the war in 1917 seemed to stimulate a new impulse among men to reassess cultural and personal values, the task of morally and spiritually justifying the war was generally delegated to the distaff genteels.

Of the seven writers most regularly chosen by Sedgwick to voice the magazine’s views on culture and literature, six were characteristically “genteel” and five of these were women. These five—Agnes Repplier, Katherine Gerould, Margaret Sherwood, Cornelia Comer and Margaret Montague—collectively published a prolific total of one hundred and twenty-seven articles and stories in the *Atlantic* during the decade, in addition to placing numerous pieces in other general-circulation magazines. They were not identical in either their backgrounds or their views. Sherwood, who taught at Wellesley College, and Comer were “old school” New England writers of fiction and polite essays. Repplier was a Philadelphia Catholic and a writer of astringent essays on contemporary manners and morals, while Montague was a West Virginia fundamentalist and commentator on “the life of the spirit.” Gerould, a New England-bred Bryn Mawr professor, was the most acute, as well as the most reactionary, of the group and was later singled out by Lionel Trilling as the ultimate instance of Anglo-Saxon Toryism. Despite some differences, however, these five shared a recognizable body of assumptions. Collectively, they were fully representative of the last genuine, embattled generation of what Santayana had called “the genteel tradition.”

An analysis of the mass of material on cultural matters published in the *Atlantic* between 1909 and 1919 by these women and others offers

considerable insight into the causes and effects of the phenomenon noted by Santayana: a culture alienated from the economic, political, social and technological vitality of the nation. It also demonstrates both the continuing influence of nineteenth-century “idealism” during the early twentieth century and the substantial changes in that creed during the fifty years after its apotheosis in Emerson. Finally, such an analysis can provide a substantial basis for defining the social, ethical and aesthetic tenets of the genteel tradition as it approached its final confrontation with modernism.

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Santayana intended his phrase “the genteel tradition” to be satirical as well as descriptive. In fairness, we should combine it with the more respectful term that the genteels used to describe their own values: “idealism.” Both terms—“genteel” and “idealism”—reflect the sources of the tradition.

The roots of genteel idealism in America lay in what observers from Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., to Stow Persons have described as an American cultural gentry.³ This gentry, Holmes’ Brahmin class, was a predominantly Northeastern and Anglo-Saxon sub-group of the middle class, generally distinct from the social, economic and political elite. They felt a strong sense of responsibility for the moral and cultural leadership of American democracy. Daniel Howe in his essay “American Victorianism as a Culture” notes that this Northeastern, Whig-Republican cultural leadership drew from both the evangelical and the liberal Protestant traditions and consciously claimed as their secular mission “to humanize the emergent industrial-capitalist order by infusing it with a measure of social responsibility, strict personal morality, and a respect for cultural standards.”⁴ As Jackson Lears points out, the Victorian cultural gentry, in fact, considerably strengthened and legitimized industrial capitalism by affirming a close connection between material and moral progress.⁵ During the mid-nineteenth century, they maintained a strong faith in the moral evolution of both individuals and societies towards an ideal set of values inherent in the universal order. This ethical progress, they felt, was the law of nature, and they were fit instruments to achieve it. The chief means to moral development were the individual will and the values transmitted through Anglo-Saxon high culture. The cultural gentry accordingly sought converts to high culture aggressively and in all areas of society. To further this spread of the gospel of culture, they created an unprecedented network for its transmission. This network began with the home, in which the mother was the primary agent of moral culture, and extended to schools, colleges, literary societies, chautauquas, magazines like the *Atlantic Monthly* and a flourishing didactic literature.

Optimism among the cultural gentry about their ability to infuse American democracy and capitalism with high culture remained strong, despite prophets of doom, during the mid-nineteenth century. In his 1867

Phi Beta Kappa address at Harvard appropriately titled “The Progress of Culture” and later published in the *Atlantic*, Emerson expansively affirmed his faith in American cultural evolution under the leadership of the “cultivated classes” whom he addressed.

Was ever such coincidence of advantages in time and place as in America today?—the fusion of races and religions; the hungry cry for men which goes up from the wide continent; the answering facility of immigration. . . . Science surpasses the old miracles of mythology. . . . All this activity has added to the value of life, and to the scope of the intellect.⁶

Moral evolution had fully kept pace with material and technological progress, Emerson asserted, as proved in the abolition of slavery and in the improved status of women and labor. The realization of America’s immense promise, however, could not be accomplished by the “foolish and sensual millions,” but required the confident leadership of a cultural elite. Said Emerson:

. . . when I look around me, and consider the sound material of which the cultivated class here is made up . . . and that the most distinguished by genius and culture are in this class of benefactors—I cannot distrust this great knighthood of virtue, or doubt that the interests of science, of letters, of politics, and humanity are safe. I think their hands are strong enough to hold up the Republic.⁷

Between Emerson’s expansive expression of faith in his 1867 address “The Progress of Culture” and Santayana’s 1911 essay “The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy,” momentous social, economic and cultural changes had calcified Emersonian idealism into the genteel tradition. The cultural gentry, Emerson’s “cultivated class,” had become increasingly refined and thereby alienated from the democracy which Emerson had exhorted them to lead. Increasingly, they doubted both the desire and the capacity of democratic and capitalistic society to respond to high culture. And although their sense of responsibility for cultural leadership of the Republic remained, they were increasingly skeptical about the results of their efforts.⁸

By 1911, many of the ethical and aesthetic values of Emersonian idealism—the spiritual essence of reality, the appreciation of nature, faith in an innate sense of right, the moral basis of great art, the importance of self-discipline and the doctrine of compensation—had ossified into dogma among educated, middle-class, Anglo-Saxon Americans. Significantly, however, there was less emphasis on self-reliance—for Emerson the chief source of all values—and more on adherence to established cultural norms and traditions. Further, both the values and the tone in which they were transmitted now tended to be repressive rather than expansive, prescriptive rather than inspirational, nostalgic rather than progressive. As Santayana noted, the tenor of idealism had become “hereditary” and retrospective. While the Emersonian faith in moral and cultural progress

was still proposed as a dogma, and experienced a brief revival as a justification for World War I, genteel literature reflects a powerful and paradoxical longing for the past.

The genteel idealists writing in the decade 1909-1919 were acutely aware of a degeneration in their society at large, if not in themselves. Unlike earlier American idealists, they looked to the past and not to the future for their models of Utopia. The most pervasive assumption that one encounters in their writings is a perception that the national culture was in the advanced stages of a change more radical than any in its history and entirely for the worse. "Somewhere," says Comer, "there was an awful break in the orderly evolution of American society. Old ideals of manners, of social intercourse, of the ends of civilized living went down; new conceptions arose, more materialistic, more selfish and therefore vulgarized."⁹ Each of the genteel writers confirms Henry Adams' sense that within their lifetime, between the Civil War and 1914, the national center of gravity had rather suddenly shifted from Quincy to State Street and the North End, from the small town to the city dominated by ruthless financial interests and crowded with rootless immigrants.

This feeling of living in a threateningly altered world radically affected the tone of genteel writers in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Their predecessors in the golden age of genteelism, the seventies and eighties, had written with a confident grace, an unshakable poise, often leavening even their more serious moments with a gentle Horatian wit. But the members of this later generation, although they attempted the same poise, were often defensive, anxious, even shrill; and their humor, when it broke through their sententiousness, had a bitter edge. During the decade 1909-1919 this irascibility increased as the genteel idealists felt more beleaguered and impotent to change the disastrous drift of things.

The more clearly inevitable the loss of that older culture became and the further it receded into the past, the more it was endowed by the genteels with the proportions of a myth—the myth of an American Eden that was theirs by right and expectation but from which they and their children were being disinherited by despoilment and displacement. Not surprisingly, the Eden of this genteel version of the Fall was set in provincial America between the 1860s and the 1880s, the very childhood world lamented by most of those writing in the *Atlantic* during the 1910s. In New England this had been the period of the long, pleasant "Indian summer." The intense cold and heat of the puritan and transcendental ideologies had moderated to a more humanly comfortable temperature, but the former had left a still strong sense of conscience and the latter an optimistic faith in human potential. The old traditions of plain living and high thinking still held some sway. But moderate wealth coupled with inherited ethics had nurtured a broader sense of civic and social obligation and provided increased leisure for social and cultural pursuits, particularly among women.

In this provincial society, the "cultivated classes" still held a cultural hegemony; their hierarchy of social and ethical values was widely recog-

nized and seldom challenged.¹⁰ “Would it sound priggish,” Comer asks, “if I said that I find a very heterogeneous society where I left a more or less homogeneous one? Everybody in it in those days was not cultured and Christian, exactly, but seemed to be striving towards that desirable condition. . . . This gave us a definite unity of principle and atmosphere.”¹¹

The Christianity that had helped to homogenize ideals of behavior was neither overly rigorous nor dogmatic, but uprightly ethical. The impact of science, particularly of evolutionary theory, on this gentle, undogmatic faith had been far from shattering. A tradition of liberal interpretation had transformed Darwin’s discoveries into evidence of the moral and spiritual evolution of mankind towards a pre-ordained ideal.

By 1911, however, genteel faith in this moral progress was severely shaken. The present, as Comer had said, seemed “an awful break in the orderly evolution of American society.”

In the minds of the genteels writing in the early twentieth century, the most pervasive factor in the destruction of the old order was the apparent triumph of materialism. While Emerson in 1867 had confidently viewed the material development of the nation as “add[ing] to the value of life, and to the scope of the intellect,” the genteel idealists fifty years later viewed it as the implacable enemy of “that rapidly vanishing atmosphere of an earlier day, of inherited spirituality, of gracious ways of thought wherein the inner life is more than the outer.”¹² Similarly, while Emerson had applauded the technological progress that underlay economic development, the genteels lamented “the tremendous series of scientific discoveries and commercial development which . . . were to enrich the material and blight the spiritual life of the land,” creating “cheap wealth, vulgarizing manners, and demoralizing principles.”¹³ The socio-economic elite who led this development were robust financial barbarians spreading the neo-pagan doctrines of materialism. They worshipped the extension of their own will in technology; their “philosophy” was pragmatism perverted to opportunism, and their ethics endorsed only the survival of the fittest.

If the cultural gentry were increasingly alienated from and antagonistic to the socio-economic elite, they were also increasingly separated from and alarmed by the working classes, especially the large proportion of immigrants. At the turn of the century, seventy-seven percent of the inhabitants of New York City were first- or second-generation immigrants, and the percentage in several other American cities, including Boston, was nearly as high.¹⁴

Emerson in his “Progress of Culture” address had talked enthusiastically of the American fusion of races and religions, and of immigration as the fortuitous response to the developing nation’s need for labor. The attitude of the genteel idealists toward the immigrant, however, was a combination of Christian sympathy, fear, distaste and cultural evangelicalism. The “old Anglo-Saxon stock” was with reason apprehensive that continued large-scale immigration would inevitably cause momentous

social changes and the loss of their cultural hegemony. Many of the genteel idealists writing in the *Atlantic* between 1909 and 1919, while clearly apprehensive, retained the Victorian faith in the capacity of their superior culture to assimilate the newcomers. The attempt to “Americanize” the immigrant by indoctrinating him in the ethical, social and political ideals traditionally professed in the United States was one of the last great waves of Victorian cultural evangelism.

Several *Atlantic* writers, however, expressed less faith and more fear. Cornelia Comer told how during the general strike of 1919 in Portland, Oregon, which she attributed to immigrant mobs under Russian communist inspiration, she bought two pistols, barricaded her house and vowed to defend to the death the American order “where the spirit can choose to be supreme.”¹⁵ With less hysteria but greater acerbity, Katherine Gerould wrote that “the influx of a racially and socially inferior population” and the dilution of the “old stock” were rapidly bringing about the “extirpation of culture,” by which she meant, of course, Anglo-Saxon Victorian culture.¹⁶ As Henry May suggests, “fear for civilization was often mixed with concern for the position in American society of the Anglo-Saxon middle class.”¹⁷

Many genteel idealists, then, began to express an uneasy feeling that it was less the immigrant who was out of step with the American present and future than they themselves. As Stow Persons notes, “caught between a rapidly growing socio-economic elite of wealthy business and financial men on the one hand, and a vulgar mass on the other, the gentry were rapidly being squeezed out.”¹⁸ Consciously and unconsciously they began to feel alien and outnumbered in a world they had assumed would be theirs. And gradually they recognized that rather than absorbing the new America into their way of life, they, or rather their children and their children’s children, would be the ones absorbed. A great deal of genteel literature in the *Atlantic* between 1909 and 1919 was written to resist this absorption or, more particularly, to persuade the young to resist it and hold to the values of prelapsarian New England.

The present younger generation, born in the late eighties or in the nineties, seemed to their elders radically different from any generation previously brought forth in this country. The most obvious manifestation of difference was that the young no longer even wanted to return to the calm, stable, disciplined, high-aimed life of the past. Their spokesmen—Sinclair Lewis, Dreiser, Anderson, Mencken and, later, Fitzgerald—rejected the myth of Eden and debunked the last fifty years as a time of repression and decorous hypocrisy, smug and gouty provincialism, intellectual and aesthetic stasis, and buried, wasted, joyless lives. For their models the young looked to the future, not, like the genteels, to the past.

The young, their genteel critics sensed, rejected the Victorian ethic based on self-control and repression to embrace what Jackson Lears has called the “therapeutic world view” emphasizing self-gratification, moral tolerance and material consumption.¹⁹ Cheap money and a materialistic culture had injected them with a love of personal pleasure. Their creed was

a precious and indulged individualism: the “culte de moi.” Paradoxically, many of them claimed to be “socialists” sympathizing with the working classes, but they lacked the “character” and discipline necessary to translate their vague humanitarianism into action. They displaced the old values of commitment beyond the self, duty, work and self-denial with the new values of self-expression, immediate gratification and freedom to experiment.

To the genteels, manners were an outward reflection of the inner spirit. The dissolution of morals among the young was manifested daily and concretely in the increasing crudeness of their taste and manners. Their social, or rather antisocial, behavior was, like their motor cars, noisy, breezy, aggressive and fast; too much raw power was coupled with insufficient and unpredictable control. Reticence, as Agnes Repplier wrote, had been repealed. Traditional decencies regarding everything from sex to skeletons in the family closet were aggressively rejected as harmful repressions and swept away by an eagerness for knowledge and experience at any price, either to self or to others.

These changes in ethics, taste and manners were, according to Gerould and others, most reprehensively manifested in “the newest woman.” “Modern woman,” the older generation felt, was decaying with spectacular rapidity under the sway of the new egotism. Women, as mothers and wives, had been looked on as the chief source of the nation’s spiritual, moral and cultural sustenance. Upon their purity and self-negating devotion depended the whole fabric of family and race; upon their grace rested the charm of social life; and upon their ideals rested the ultimate direction of American civilization. But with this “newest woman” all seemed changed—changed utterly. Feminism and modern manners were teaching the young woman to exchange supportive roles for assertive ones, to envy and imitate men, to compete and to enjoy herself. They taught her, in the genteels’ view, to barter her honored place at the center of family life, the sustaining tenderness and radiant idealism that were hers by nature and long custom, for the dubious gain of the vote and the freedom to explore a vulgarized world.

In general, the genteels of 1909-1919 felt as little enthusiasm for other modern social and political reforms as they did for feminism and cultural novelties. Many of their mid-nineteenth-century racial and ethical forebears had been liberal Republicans favoring the abolition of slavery, civil service reform and clean government. But in politics as in cultural affairs, the nation had changed so rapidly that someone holding the principles of a mid-nineteenth-century liberal would find the moderate progressive causes of the 1910s distasteful in style and content. The genteel, like the nineteenth-century liberal, emphasized reform as an act of conscience, stressed individual moral responsibility and insisted on spiritual as well as material benefits. Twentieth-century reformers, the “new liberals” and the young, stressed political and economic collectivism implemented through impersonal institutions toward the ends of purely material well-being. They condemned the genteels’ emphasis on acts of individual

conscience as moral snobbery and their stress on spiritual and ethical content as patronizing “uplift” and cultural imperialism.²⁰

In matters of politics and social organization, then, as well as in the cultural matters on which they most frequently wrote, the genteels transformed an inherited faith in progressive idealism into a retrospective longing to repeal the present and reinstate the past. During the first two decades of this century, many of them still professed faith in that Victorian hybrid world view that crossed Darwinian evolution with the Christian sense of divine purpose. “From the beginning of time,” they catechized, “the tendency of evolution has been steadily towards the creation of the finer, the more complicated type.”²¹ The furthest present advance of this type was, of course, their own culture.

But, as the contrast with Emerson’s 1867 address “The Progress of Culture” demonstrates, the genteels of fifty years later had lost considerable faith in cultural evolution. First, they had lost Emerson’s faith that material and technological development would further ethical and cultural development; instead they were inclined to view these forces as irreconcilable. Second, they had lost faith in the susceptibility both of the socio-economic elite and of the democratic mass to high culture. Further, the task of infusing capitalistic, democratic American society with the tradition of Anglo-Saxon high culture was aggravated by the tremendous influx of immigrants who had to be “Americanized,” and by an incipient revolt among their own children.

To some, typified by Barrett Wendell and among *Atlantic* writers by Katherine Gerould and Henry Dwight Sedgwick, the task of converting American democracy to traditional idealistic culture seemed impossible. These critics bitterly viewed American society as unalterably debased and themselves as futile relics of a dying culture.²² The other, more characteristic reaction among genteels to the tribulations of the age was an intensified interest in cultural evangelism, a renewed dedication to defending and extending the traditional hegemony of genteel idealism.

However, even those genteel idealists who did retain faith in the feasibility of cultural progress in a democratic society held a rather paradoxical notion of progress quite different from Emerson’s. In fact, their concept of genuine progress posited first a return to the morals and manners of an earlier age, the mid-Victorian golden age of their childhood. When they were most sanguine about the future, their projection of it most occultly resembled their remembrances of their own past. At these moments, they could lay down the burden of Cassandra and happily prophesy that: “The Conventions, Duty and Goodness, all those Victorian notions are due to come again. They will shortly be the very latest mode in moralities, the very latest thing.”²³ To this return the genteel literature of the period was dedicated. Its primary purpose was to reindulge, especially in the young, the values of the golden age; to illustrate that the way of discipline, self-sacrifice, work and obedience to duty is “the only way that works”; to reestablish a broken continuity between the generations and between America’s past and its future. As it turned out, the real

psychological effect achieved by this literature was not the conversion of the young, but the illusory reassurance of the old.

ii

The literary tastes and principles characteristic of the genteel idealists were inextricably bound with their social and moral beliefs. They habitually viewed aesthetics as a branch of ethics. And they saw in the contemporary arts an extension of the battle lines being pitched in the great war between traditional moral principles and twentieth-century experiment for the future of civilization. Led by Sherwood and Comer, the idealists dominated literary criticism in the *Atlantic* at least until 1916 and continued long after that to exert a powerful influence. During the decade 1909-1919 their attitudes towards the newer modes of literature fluctuated between simple distaste, ridicule, righteous condemnation and reluctant willingness to find the best in a bad situation.

The major sources of genteel aesthetics, insofar as it had formal antecedents, were Emerson and Arnold:

Upon the glazen shelves kept watch
Matthew and Waldo, guardians of the faith,
The army of unalterable law.²⁴

Ruskin, Sidney and Plato were also popular sanctions. The highest function of art, the critical catechism began, is to instruct and develop the ethical and spiritual faculties. Literature could most effectively accomplish this by presenting "images of moral beauty." "God made artists," wrote one *Atlantic* critic, "that high deeds may not be quite forgotten, that high loves may be kept alive."²⁵ The greatest art, however, does not record fact but penetrates through the material world and becomes "a voicing of the oversoul," a discovery of universal laws of aesthetic beauty, intellectual truth and ethical rightness. All art, then, should reveal, create or perpetuate ideal patterns for imitation.

Contemporary realism, and especially naturalism, the genteels charged, conspicuously failed to delineate these ideal patterns. Rather, it meticulously applied to literature the values and attitudes of modern materialism. Instead of offering alternatives to this filthy modern tide, realism compounded its effects.

The criticisms most frequently voiced by the *Atlantic* "idealists" against contemporary writers like Dreiser and London, Upton Sinclair and Sherwood Anderson, H. G. Wells and Arnold Bennett, were threefold. The first—and least important—was the vulgarity of their subject matter. It seemed to them that the realists perversely considered the sick and sordid as somehow more "real"—and therefore more worthy of attention—than humanity's better impulses. Further, the "repeal of reticence" in literature was a portent too disturbing to ignore. In 1915, Comer wrote of the novels of the first year of the war in Europe: "Noteworthy also has been a violent ebullition of the flesh in fiction. . . . The main current of fiction a year ago

ran turbid as the Mississippi in flood. . . . Such things are signs of some disaster at the hidden source of springs. Marked as always by the violent, the outré, the utterly unreasonable and unspiritual, the end of an era was upon us, and we knew it not.”²⁶

This “violent ebullition of the flesh of fiction” was intimately related in the minds of the genteel idealists to a larger and more fundamental charge which they leveled against contemporary realism—that it presented to humanity a degraded image of itself. Too often men and women were viewed merely as the statistical sum of their animal instincts and their material circumstances. Conscience, in which Emerson and Wordsworth had found the seed of an immortal soul, was seen either as a hypocritical veneer to rationalize self-interest or as a form of social indoctrination which proved a liability in the individual’s struggle to survive. Free will, the foundation of moral responsibility, was denied by the pseudo-science of an elaborately documented materialistic determinism. Modern realism and naturalism, then, refuted the very existence of those higher faculties on which genteel theology and ethics were founded—and in doing so grossly transgressed the first purpose of literature. Rather than providing an ideal image of human strength and dignity to which men and women might aspire, it attempted to convince them that they were pathetic pawns of appetite and environment. In their own fiction, as we will see, the genteels made a counterassertion that the primary motivating force in human nature was often not base animal instincts but a highly developed moral instinct. Paradoxically, however, while refuting the naturalistic view of human motives, they tended to affirm the naturalistic principles of cultural determinism and atavistic reversion to racial type.

The third fundamental criticism leveled by *Atlantic* genteels against contemporary literature concerned the author’s relation to his work rather than its subject matter. They were greatly disturbed by what seemed an abdication of ethical responsibility on the part of both poets and novelists. In 1917 Margaret Sherwood wrote of Frost and Masters, and of contemporary artists in general: “Born in an age of analysis, of severing, pulling apart, they lack—perhaps it could not be otherwise—constructive idealism, faith, vision. Their art is an art of flickers of insight, flashes of suggestion, recording momentary impressions, denying us that guiding thread of interpretation of existence which is the artist’s chief task.”²⁷ Writers seemed to have resigned their old responsibilities as moral guides to their works in favor of clinical detachment, satirical cynicism, ironic cleverness or cosmopolitan nonchalance. Rather than guiding ethical judgment, Dreiser and his school attempted to suspend and nullify it, inducing readers to excuse the inexcusable. Even the best, the novelists of reform like Winston Churchill and David Graham Phillips, failed to recognize that “not through loud wailing over evil can a nation be built but through resolute dwelling with higher ideals.”²⁸

This abdication of moral vision and conviction, particularly among American writers, was seen by some genteel idealists as a result of foreign, or rather non-Anglo-Saxon, philosophies. The genius of the American

people and of their writers, they felt, had since the puritan forefathers been in the application of moral principle to all facets of public and private life. The new moral indifference was a cosmopolitan import, derived from such sources as the bestial naturalism of Zola, the frigid realism of Flaubert, the decadent grotesqueries of the French symbolists, the indulgent impressionism fostered by Bergson and Proust, and the anti-ethics of Nietzsche, Shaw and the Scandinavian drama. More recently the intellectual and artistic exports from the Continent had been symptoms of a growing madness. Futurism, Expressionism and Cubism produced works that were "hysteria made visible." "Such few survivals," Comer wrote in 1915, "of the work of Picasso, Picabia and their like as exist, carry the effect of disintegration so far that it produces an actual nausea in the beholder." Such works were "shriekingly the kind of creation that precedes debacle."²⁹

If Europe was becoming morally, aesthetically and intellectually crazed, let America beware and take pains to cultivate her own wholesome traditions. As early as 1910 Margaret Sherwood noted that the cosmopolitan "fashion of these later days points to decadent literature in which the sins and shortcomings of mankind are dealt with admiringly or flippantly. . . ." But she optimistically concluded: "There is, happily, enough of morality and of decency in our tradition to forbid our thinking this way, and our race consciousness under all the shifts and changes of fashion is as true as is great drama to the underlying laws of life."³⁰ Aesthetic and intellectual as well as social salvation lay in reaffirming and strengthening our connection with the ethical instincts of the Anglo-Saxon race and with the tradition of American idealism founded on those instincts.

The genteels, then, criticized contemporary literature on ethical grounds for the vulgarity of its subject matter, its debasing view of humanity and its failure to portray traditional Anglo-Saxon moral ideals. Underlying these expressions of principle was the feeling that the characters and situations created in modern fiction were in a very personal way neither familiar, attractive nor sympathetic. The genteels retained the nineteenth-century habit of treating a novel not as an aesthetic experience separable from the rest of one's life but as a society whose members became close acquaintances and were often introduced into one's family circle. Idiots and criminals, the desperate and the neurotic of every variety, might be interesting to observe from an aesthetic distance, but in selecting intimates to live among, one was likely to be more exacting and want something closer to one's own type.

Unlike Thackeray, Trollope or even Howells, the modern novel seldom introduced genteel readers into the company of their familiars, "decently born and bred" middle-class men and women of good will. Nor did it offer a share in the quiet happiness or vicissitudes of domesticity, the small but poignantly felt pleasures, excitements, defeats, and triumphs of social life among civilized and principled men and women. "Good cheer," it seemed, had "gone out of late years in life as well as in literature." There was no place in fiction for gentle humor or for old-fashioned "comforting,

humanly pleasant stuff.”³¹ If neither the characters nor the author in modern fiction was likely to prove entertaining, instructive or sympathetic company, “why then,” the genteels implied, “blame us if we prefer the more congenial society of older books?” Thus, while the genteel critics tried to view naturalism and modernism as temporary aberrations in the inevitable progress of an ethical literary culture, their heartfelt allegiances reflected what Santayana called “the hereditary spirit.”

iii

The fiction published in the *Atlantic* by the genteel idealists during the decade 1909-1919 is a paradigm of their aesthetic principles, ethical precepts, racial prejudices and anxieties over social change. Above all, it is an instrument of their revitalized cultural evangelism, an attempt to reassert their cultural hegemony. Its essential method is to present a moral ideal for imitation by its readers. Thus, its usual subject is the conversion of the erring to traditional idealistic values. Generally, the converts are young men and women of the writers’ own social type—a choice that reflected the growing concern with rescuing the young from the temptations of modernity. But the full range of those who walk the pages of this fiction includes a variety of the unassimilated: pitiable immigrant girls, Appalachian rustics, brash tycoons and the new breed of American with strange names and amusingly atrocious taste in ties. Many of these characters are basically good-hearted, but ethically benighted. All are candidates for regeneracy, “Americanization” and assimilation into the older traditions. The coming of this moral regeneracy—and thereby of assimilation—forms the narrative of each story.

These fictions are transparent ethical instruction; they frankly have designs on the reader. Narrators bend readers’ ears with generous amounts of moral guidance. Thinly veiled author-surrogates freely dispense the wisdom of Polonius. Characters become spokesmen for various moral points of view. Several authors, for instance, follow the formula of a debate for two or three voices followed by a predictable disaster—fire, train wreck or war—which puts to the test the creeds discussed and reveals the solidity of the old ways and the bankruptcy of the new.

In form and content, then, this literature resembles a type of genteel moral exemplum. The central figures, the young, naive or spiritually unformed individuals, are led into the temptation and spiritual turpitudes of modern America. The climactic moment of the narrative is the moment of final moral choice. Almost unfailingly this crisis precipitates a type of spiritual revelation. The initiates discover—often to their astonishment—that they cannot do otherwise than to obey a sort of moral imperative; to choose regeneracy; to choose duty, sacrifice, discipline, generosity and faith while abandoning selfishness, indulgence and cowardice. The final consequences of this choice are not necessarily personal “happiness” or success, but an Emersonian compensation, a spiritual fulfillment deeper than happiness. In picturing the operation of the moral imperative, its

beneficial consequences and compensations, the genteel writers felt that they were offering the reader "an image of moral beauty" and an alternative to the degrading view of human nature projected by the naturalists.

Although the pattern of temptation, revelation and conversion is directly derived from the Protestant tradition, doctrinal religion seldom figures as a motive for regeneracy. Yet in these fictions by the genteels themselves, as in the naturalistic fiction they despised, crucial decisions often seem determined by forces beyond the individual will. The three major sources of salvation from the broad road to misery are love, racial tradition and the instinct of conscience.

The love that rescues the reckless, feckless or hapless from their moral turpitude is of a thoroughly domestic and domesticating sort, affirming the dictates of social responsibility and conscience. For instance, in Margaret Sherwood's sentimental story "The Clearest Voice," a man beset by financial problems is morally convinced to forego an inheritance in favor of the prodigal son of the deceased. The decisive influence on this generous decision is the still, small voice of his beloved wife, five years dead. Marriage is the salvation of many. In L. P. Jacks' "Mary," the heroine, a determinedly "modern woman," gives up her selfish freedom, her intellectual pursuits, her radical causes, for hard work and domestic contentment as the wife of a strong, plain and honest Canadian farmer. In other tales, strikingly pretty and high-spirited but morally staunch young women persuade young men to give up corrupting million-dollar fortunes or clever but unprincipled friends to regain their spiritual uprightness—and incidentally to marry. In genteel fiction, women retained their Victorian moral superiority and their function as the chief agents of cultural assimilation, but only through their roles as wives and mothers. Outside these domestic roles they were lost, functionless and socially destructive.

The genteel idealists, however, sensed that even properly domesticated love is not in itself an entirely reliable moral force. Therefore, in most of their stories love only accentuates a preexisting internal disposition towards the right. These fictions strongly affirm the existence of a moral imperative similar to the sense of conscience that the genteels' puritan forebears identified as a sign of regeneracy and Emerson as an element of Divinity within man. This instinct, although often submerged by selfish habit, could inexplicably overwhelm its possessor, body and soul, in situations of crisis requiring moral decision. In Margaret Montague's popular story "Of Water and the Spirit," a very ordinary American woman touring France finds herself suddenly amidst dead and dying French troops in the aftermath of battle. Without thought or hesitation, she abandons her companions and her personal safety to bring water and bind wounds. In retrospect she summarized her revelation: "I know I broke through into something bigger than I had ever been. . . . It's like something big and terrible smashed its fist right through the little fancy things. . . . Nothin [matters now] but God, and love, and doin things for folks."³²

This same revelation of the moral imperative appears repeatedly in the short stories of the *Atlantic's* three most prolific genteels, Katherine Gerould, Margaret Sherwood and Cornelia Comer. But rather than viewing moral intuition as a universal element in human nature, this triumvirate attributes it directly to racial inheritance and cultural training. Katherine Gerould's "A Moth of Peace" is the well-told story of a delicate, "decently born," young American woman living in France at the outbreak of the war. Confronted by German occupation she suddenly discovers, after much fear and trembling, that she herself possesses the self-reliance and iron will of her New England progenitors; she prepares to defy the enemy and calm the terrified peasants. Gerould wrote the editor of the *Atlantic*: "I meant to show that nothing would save a timorous, lonely, bewildered girl of that sort save a decent inherited instinct. . . ." ³³

Margaret Sherwood's pastoral romance "Pan and the Crusader" also posits the racial origin of ethics. A fair-complexioned, melancholy young knight, born to a materialistic age after the great crusades, restlessly sails southward on a vague quest to fill the spiritual void he feels. Shipwrecked on a southern island, he is tempted to remain with its gentle, olive-skinned inhabitants who worship Pan, the god of Nature, and lead a pleasant, unthinking, modestly sensual life. But as the knight is about to renounce his mission for this serene paradise, he is suddenly seized by a revelation of his higher destiny. Catching sight of ships belonging to others of his fair-skinned, melancholy, questing race, he breaks away to join them. "To him had been given for brief moments the joy of the earth, yet nought could wrest from him his deeper heritage of pain, the living right to suffer." ³⁴ Here again the moral imperative takes the form of an atavistic reversion to racial type.

Cornelia Comer's "The Long Inheritance," published in 1911, the year of Santayana's first essay on the genteel tradition, is another tale of moral salvation effected by racial instinct. But it is so characteristic of genteel fiction in general that a brief analysis of it can serve as a synopsis of genteel social and ethical and aesthetic thought during the decade. The narrator, an elderly New Englander, rapidly establishes the controlling point of view by defining the social circle to which he, and by implication his audience, belong. "'We,'" he says, "means to me people of an heredity and training like my own—Americans of the old stock, with a normal Christian upbringing, who presumably inherit from their forebears a reasonable susceptibility to high ideals of living. . . ." ³⁵ The narrator is astonished and dismayed to discover that even this fortunate circle has been infected by the modern decay of ethics. After ten years of marriage, his own favorite niece, appropriately named Desire, has suddenly announced her intention to divorce her husband, a slightly austere but dedicated physician. As a modern woman she demands freedom from routine domestic duty, freedom to develop and express herself, freedom to love someone whose interests and temperament are suited to hers.

Four attitudes towards the divorce—all opposed—are presented more or less didactically. The mother believes it to be an unpardonable sin

against God, against family and against herself personally. Desire, she says, is simply “an indulged woman . . . wanting to uplift the masses with Scandinavian drama and medieval art and woman suffrage.”³⁶ A more worldly aunt tries to understand and sympathize with Desire but breaks down, declaring the essential wrongheadedness of her niece’s action. The narrating uncle says simply that personal happiness must be sacrificed to social stability, which depends entirely on the integrity of marriage. The stiff-lipped, honorable husband only wonders bitterly what modern women want and insists on paying for Desire’s sojourn in Reno, since until the divorce she is still his wife.

Desire herself we do not hear from until the very end of the story, when she returns from Reno wonderfully regenerate. Reno, the epitome of all feckless, fast-moving, pleasure-principled, westward America, has transformed her not into a free and single woman, but into a true daughter of her Anglo-Saxon race. Significantly, Desire’s ethical conversion in Reno has been preceded by an aesthetic and social revulsion at those tasteless, materialistic, selfish and soulless women who are there for the same purpose as she. They make her own motives for seeking divorce seem, like theirs, unbearably cheap, vulgar and low. She feels a wave of nausea at finding herself, a “daughter of the pilgrims,” “doing the commonest things like the commonest creature.”³⁷ Regeneracy begins with taste and pride in one’s racial traditions. Shame plays as large a part as guilt in genteel culture.

Terrified by the recognition of her fallen state, Desire undergoes a conversion experience similar in form to those claimed by her Puritan ancestry. At her moment of greatest self-loathing, as she lies unsleeping in the darkness fearing that she has lost her soul, she receives a sign of genteel grace, the “long inheritance” from her forebears: “And it seemed to me that I could see and feel—like the flight of wings in the dark over my head—the passing of the struggling generations of my fathers, each one achieving a little more; going from decency to good repute, and from repute to renown, keeping faith with one another and with God, from father to son.”³⁸

Through this revelation of racial destiny, Desire achieves ethical salvation. She no longer desires freedom to develop and express an autonomous self, but instead finds truth in the Christian paradox that only in service is perfect freedom. She commits herself to a new covenant; her marriage may remain narrow but her satisfaction now rests not in pleasure but in fulfilling her duty to her husband, to her children, and thus to her race, past and future. It is only through such sacrifice of individuals to the traditions and the ideals of the race, not by following alien ideals leading to modish reforms, that moral evolution, the aim and justification of all human existence, is possible. “One life,” says Desire, “is nothing. Families build righteousness as coral insects build a reef.”³⁹ (It is interesting to note here that while the sentiment is quintessentially genteel, both the biological metaphor and the image of the individual sacrificed to the continued development of the race are typical of melioristic natural-

ism.)⁴⁰ Finally, the conversion pattern characteristic of genteel fiction is completed by an ending that projects not happiness but spiritual compensation and an affirmation of genteel regeneracy. "I may not be happy, but I don't seem to want to be happy," Desire proclaims with triumph. "I want to do the seemly, fitting things, the decent things."⁴¹

"The Long Inheritance" typifies genteel fiction between 1909 and 1919 in the didacticism of its form, in its picture of the young in danger of absorption by the general moral decline and in its emphasis on ethical redemption through a moral imperative deriving from racial instinct and cultural tradition. The primary purpose of this fiction was typically cultural conversion and assimilation. Most genteel fiction of the period, like "The Long Inheritance," reasserted a brave faith in the moral and cultural evolution of individuals and of at least portions of American society even in the face of potent corrosive forces: corrupting materialism, an influx of foreign cultural influences, the indulged individualism of the young and feminist threats to the integrity of the family. The driving force of this ethical progress was a sort of moral imperative instilled in the individual variously by "Americanization" for the immigrant, by domestication for the materialistic male or the feminist, or by sheer indwelling instinct. Frequently, as in "The Long Inheritance" and stories by Katherine Gerould, Margaret Sherwood and Alice Brown among others, this moral imperative is seen as an hereditary Anglo-Saxon racial and cultural trait. Thus, moral progress is achieved paradoxically through an atavistic reversion to type and a reconnection with racial traditions.

While the genteel tradition with its professed faith in moral progress traced its roots to Emersonian idealism, the fiction, like the essays on culture, written by the genteels of this period demonstrates that it was neither progressive nor individualistic as Emerson was, but rather retrospective, traditional and almost tribal. Emerson had asserted in his 1867 address as elsewhere that the progress of culture depended entirely on the leadership of self-reliant individuals following their own genius in defiance of convention. The genteel writers, however, asserted that self-reliant individualism was culturally destructive, both because it threatened the family, which was the primary agent of cultural transmission, and because progress depended on a continuity with the past. An individual, particularly a woman, acting independently even with the best intentions, was worse than futile. Genuine cultural progress came not through self-reliant individualism, but rather through the submission of the individual to the instincts and traditions of the race. In this denial of the value of autonomous achievement, genteel idealism was, in Jackson Lear's terms, clearly anti-modern.⁴²

Further, members of the genteel tradition had entirely lost Emerson's faith in the compatibility between capitalistic material progress and democratic social progress on the one hand and the progress of culture and ethics on the other. They insisted rather that cultural and moral progress could come only through opposition to further democratization and material enrichment. Thus, the later genteel tradition not only manifested

in itself the split noted by Santayana in the American mind between practical and cultural affairs, but concluded that these two forces were irreconcilable antagonists.

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notes

1. George Santayana, "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy," in *The Genteel Tradition: Nine Essays*, ed. Douglas L. Wilson (Cambridge, 1967), 39-40.
2. Henry F. May, *The End of American Innocence* (New York, 1959), 54-55.
3. Oliver Wendell Holmes, *Elsie Venner* (Boston, 1861), 1-6; Stow Persons, *The Decline of American Gentility* (New York, 1973). Holmes saw this cultural gentry as an hereditary caste, while Persons emphasizes that its membership was open and fluid.
4. Daniel Howe, "American Victorianism as a Culture," *American Quarterly*, 27 (1975), 516.
5. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace* (New York, 1981), 17.
6. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Progress of Culture," *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Concord Edition VIII (Boston, 1904), 207.
7. *Ibid.*, 234.
8. In his notes on "The Progress of Culture" in the Concord Edition of 1904, Edward Waldo Emerson apologizes for the optimism of his father's address. "If the address surprises the readers of to-day [1904] by its tone of secure hopefulness with regard to America's future, the conditions of that day [1867] should be recalled, as well as Mr. Emerson's faith in the great laws that work for the good" (VIII, 405). This apology in itself suggests the great waning of faith among the idealists during the intervening forty years.
9. Cornelia Comer, "The Vanishing Lady," *Atlantic Monthly* (December, 1911), 727.
10. Lears, *No Place of Grace*, xv, defines cultural hegemony as "winning the 'spontaneous' loyalty of subordinate groups to a common set of values or attitudes."
11. Comer, "The Vanishing Lady," 721.
12. Margaret Sherwood, "Characters in Recent Fiction," *Atlantic Monthly* (May, 1912), 674.
13. Comer, "The Vanishing Lady," 725.
14. Mark Sullivan, *Our Times*, IV (New York, 1932), 202.
15. Cornelia Comer, "Bedrock," *Atlantic Monthly* (May, 1919), 700.
16. Katherine Gerould, "The Extirpation of Culture," *Atlantic Monthly* (October, 1915), 445-455.
17. May, *End of American Innocence*, 334.
18. Stow Persons, *The Decline of American Gentility*, 103.
19. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 47-58, discusses the shift from a Victorian to a "therapeutic" world view.
20. For a critique of genteel "altruism" see Randolph Bourne, "This Older Generation," *Atlantic Monthly* (September, 1915), 385-391.
21. Comer, "The Vanishing Lady," 732.
22. See Katherine Gerould, "The Extirpation of Culture," and Henry Dwight Sedgwick, *In Praise of Gentlemen* (Boston, 1935).
23. Cornelia Comer, "Recent Reflections of a Novel Reader," *Atlantic Monthly* (October, 1914), 532.
24. Thomas Stearns Eliot, "Cousin Nancy," *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950* (New York, 1958), 18.
25. Comer, "Recent Reflections," *Atlantic Monthly* (April, 1914), 496.
26. Comer, "Recent Reflections," *Atlantic Monthly* (April, 1915), 502.
27. Margaret Sherwood, "The Timidity of Our Boldness," *Atlantic Monthly* (January, 1917), 64.
28. Margaret Sherwood, "The Other Side," *Atlantic Monthly* (March, 1914), 358.
29. Comer, "Recent Reflections," *Atlantic Monthly* (April, 1915), 501.
30. Margaret Sherwood, "Lying Like Truth," *Atlantic Monthly* (December, 1910), 812.
31. Comer, "Recent Reflections," *Atlantic Monthly* (April, 1914), 490.
32. Margaret Montague, "Of Water and the Spirit," *Atlantic Monthly* (May, 1916), 621.
33. Katherine Gerould, Letter to Ellery Sedgwick, October 25, 1914, in the editorial files of the *Atlantic Monthly Company*, 8 Arlington Street, Boston, Massachusetts.
34. Margaret Sherwood, "Pan and the Crusader," *Atlantic Monthly* (August, 1910), 164.
35. Cornelia Comer, "The Long Inheritance," *Atlantic Monthly* (August, 1911), 145.
36. *Ibid.*, 149.
37. *Ibid.*, 160.
38. *Ibid.*
39. *Ibid.*

40. Malcolm Cowley notes that the doctrine of universal progress was shared by melioristic naturalism and Emersonian idealism. See Cowley's essay "A Natural History of American Naturalism," *A Many Windowed House* (Carbondale, Illinois, 1970), 131.

41. Comer, "The Long Inheritance," 160.

42. Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 16-17. Lears sees the high valuation of autonomous selfhood and autonomous achievement as a central tenet of modernism.