

Safety and Disaster through Indefinition · Paul Baender

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MANY YEARS AGO I began noticing in American fiction a recurrent configuration of characters, wherein one or a few individuals in a plot were represented as multi-talented and variously oriented, and the remainder were represented as fixed in limited identities—a mother of a particular and determinative background; a father or other older male of a particular and clear disposition; friends, enemies and lovers whose behavior did not vary so much as to confuse a sense of their nature; and so forth. I was aware that the attribution of complexity to a central character and simplicity to minor ones was a means of achieving perspective and emphasis, and that such strategic attribution could be found throughout literary history. But in the configurations I was concerned about, the mixed characters, as I shall call them temporarily, were at times not central to their plots—indeed were often on the fringe—and their mixtures as against the other characters' simplicities were issues in the plots. For instance, there are several conversations in W. D. Howells's *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890) in which the staid and well-defined characters attempt to come to terms with the "versatility" of the artist Angus Beaton. I knew that what I was noticing in these configurations was substance, not mere instrumentation, and from their recurrence over several generations of our writers I believed I was on the track of something that had a strong cultural pull. And so I set out to explore.

My preliminary formulations were based largely upon recollections of earlier reading, and consequently they had an imbalance of the monumental and spectacular, which my memory is prone to retain. I thought of Natty Bumppo, James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking, that hero who evinced the fullest manhood through embodying the cultures of the wilderness and of civilization—and that same character surrounded by a comic pedant, a fierce Redman, a Noble Savage, a greedy pioneer, a sterling gentleman, and the rest of Cooper's crowd, all of them crudely simple and many of them commonplace, but against whose trite simplicity Leatherstocking's new and transcendent richness of character was all the more striking. I thought of historical persons who, like Leatherstocking, had been characterized as combining cultures ordinarily polar. I recalled the famous St. Aubin engraving of Benjamin Franklin wearing both wire-rimmed spectacles and

a fur hat: the spectacles identified the cosmopolitan philosopher while the hat proclaimed the child of nature. There was Thomas Jefferson, of whom it became formulaic praise to say that because of his family background he was both Tuckahoe and Cohee—that is, both lowland and upland, both plantation and backwoods, both aristocrat and yeoman. Though the geographic scope of this gamut may seem parochial, the formula claimed for Jefferson a native cultural hospitality and reconciliation no less extensive than that of the Pharaohs, who embodied both Lower Egypt and Upper Egypt and, as “opposites in equilibrium,” contained both Horus and Seth, the warring gods respectively associated with the two kingdoms (Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods*). Again in fiction, I thought of an American’s fantasy about the son of an English lord raised among African apes, whose heredity and upbringing were so disparate as to support the repeated affectations of wonderment with which the author celebrated his creation: “How may we judge him, by what standards, this ape-man with the heart and head and body of an English gentleman, and the training of a wild beast?”

The emergence of such examples in my early thinking led me to believe that my subject was the representation in American literature of paragons of versatility—of Americans as in general they aspired to be and as a few were fortunate enough to have been. I knew that by “versatility” I did not mean the possession of various talents and skills, often associated with the Yankee and with frontier culture, which primitive or other necessities might bring into action. This went with being human, like having a left hand to drive the nail and a right hand to hold the board. It was an accidental variation of merely practical importance whether one person had ten units of such versatility to another person’s six, and there was no way the person of six could emulate the person of ten. My subject, I thought, was what I called “radical versatility.” By that I mean the presence in a single character of dispositions and cultural traits not expected to be in combination, indeed conceived to be incompatible, and yet which made him grow into a fullness of spirit beyond prejudice, special interest, and trivial attachment—as Henry James said of his Christopher Newman: “in a posture of general hospitality to the chances of life, of being very much at one’s own disposal.” Consequently I envisioned my subject as an extension from R. W. B. Lewis’s remarkable book, *The American Adam*. Professor Lewis had established for American culture during the period 1820-1860 a dialectic between what he called the Party of Hope and the Party of Memory as to a developing myth of the new American, without determinative or even known origins, who breaks with tradition to create himself and to make a world in the process of that creation. My job would be to modify certain contours, document certain trends, and introduce certain stresses, most usefully for the periods beyond 1860, where Professor Lewis virtually ended his coverage.

But when I began to read around in American literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries I started seeing things that made me reconsider my categories. Characters in fiction that were radically versatile in the ways I have described were not always oriented toward the future, were often represented as having escaped diachrony by bearing within them the past and by pre-empting the future, and at times were able to dilate and conspire only with the alien winds of the south seas (Melville, *Typee*), Latin America (Richard Harding Davis, *Soldiers of Fortune*), or other places remote from America with her commitment to progress through time. On the other hand, the staid characters in the fictions—and many popular educators and moralists who have addressed American youth over the generations—have been the progressives in the obvious sense of the term. They may defend traditional standards of purposiveness and industry and, like Henry Ward Beecher, recommend those traits on the score of their being “old-fashioned” (*Lectures to Young Men*, 1845), but this sort of affectionate appeal is toward the end of confirming the rightness of the historical movement to which they are committed. The restricted characters in the fictions and the moralists in actual experience may specifically attack versatility, like the clergyman Theodore T. Munger in another book for young men, *On the Threshold* (1880), where he said that “Versatility is overpraised,” or like the conventional characters in Howells’s *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, who redefine Angus Beaton’s versatility as selfishness. But these are not the attacks of a Party of Memory on a Party of the Future; they are condemnations of a self-indulgence that threatens the perpetuation and progress of society.

Perhaps the key experience in my reading, the one that made me seriously doubt that my subject was radical versatility as such versus concentration of effort as such, was James Gibbons Huneker. Huneker himself was a versatile man. Born in Philadelphia in 1860, he was a gifted musician who studied piano at the Paris Conservatory, after having dabbled in mechanical work and in law. For ten years he taught at the National Conservatory of Music in New York. In 1900 he began a long career with the *New York Sun* as music, drama, and art critic, in all of which he was expert. In addition to his articles for the *Sun*, and near the end of his life for the *New York Times* and the *New York World*, Huneker produced many books, including an important early work on Chopin, books of drama and art criticism, stories, autobiography, and one novel, *Painted Veils*, published shortly before his death in 1921. In his autobiography, *Steeplejack*, and throughout his other books Huneker used the words “versatile” and “versatility” as terms of ultimate praise so often as to make them seem like such conversational counters as “cool” or “neat”—the conveniences of someone writing in a hurry, as Huneker characteristically did, who might fall back upon familiar terms indicating a common though imprecise value. Here are just some of the people he called versatile: Ibsen, Strindberg, G. B. Shaw, Stendhal, Baudelaire, Max Heinrich, Flaubert, Anatole France,

Rémy de Gourmont, Richard Wagner, Victor Maurel, George Washington Turner (manager of *The Recorder*, a short-lived New York newspaper), Michael Cross (an early music teacher in Philadelphia), William Thompson, George Cabot Lodge, Joseph Conrad, George Moore, Jews in general; and the city of New York was “the most versatile city on our globe” (*New Cosmopolis*).

Huneker recognized versatility in himself, and though he was fond of repeating his own maxim that “versatility is not heaven sent, but is largely a matter of elbow-grease,” he regarded it as the gift of a certain temperament. “I had the centrifugal temperament,” he wrote in *Steeplejack*, “not the centripetal. President Wilson has the centripetal . . . a ‘one-track mind’ The aptitude displayed by the Yankee for a half-dozen pursuits is the sign-manual of the centrifugal soul. It is pleasant to hear the whirring of its wheels though they serve no particular purpose. Thrashing the sea, eating the air promise-crammed, filling the belly with the east wind, fighting windmills—these are a few attributes of the centrifugalist. He is nothing if not versatile. His intensity lasts ten minutes. . . . The sensory periphery is more masterful than the hub of his being.” Causally behind such temperaments was a culturally and ethnically mixed heritage, reminiscent of the “Tuckahoe and Cohee” formula applied to Thomas Jefferson. Thus the “dual temperament” which Huneker attributed to Flaubert could be traced to his parents—the father a renowned surgeon of steady, middle-class Champeinois stock, the mother an aristocratic Norman from whom Gustave “inherited his love of art, his disdain for philistines, and his adventurous disposition” (*Egoists*). Huneker announced the comparable credentials of his own background: Irish on his mother’s side; a mixture of Hungarian, English, and Pennsylvania Dutch on his father’s. To Huneker the mother’s side alone accounted for much of his vagariousness: “The acute sensitiveness, the instability of temperament, the alternations of timidity and rashness, the morbid exaltation and depression which were, and still are the stigmata of my personal ‘case’ . . . come from the Irish side of my house” (*Steeplejack*). He goes on to claim for himself “a polyphonic mind” and says that he enjoys “the simultaneous flight of a half-dozen trains of ideas, which run on parallel tracks for a certain distance, then disappear, arriving nowhere. . . . I often suffer from ‘split’ or dissociated personalities, hence my discursiveness—to call such fugitive ideation by so mild a name.”

Huneker’s explanation of his temperament through ethnic references may seem to account for the evident complacency with which he admits he suffers from “‘split’ or dissociated personalities,” for such references were commonly made in the nineteenth century—and well into the twentieth—not just to establish the quiddity or “thisness” of persons but also to recommend them as exceptionally broad in their orientations. In 1855, for example, Dr. James M’Cune Smith, himself a man of mixed blood, said the following in his introduction to Frederick Douglass’s *My Bondage and My*

Freedom: “[Douglass] is a Representative American man—a type of his countrymen. Naturalists tell us that a full grown man is a resultant or representative of all animated nature on this globe. . . . To the fullest extent, has Frederick Douglass passed through every gradation of rank comprised in our national makeup The versatility of talent which he wields . . . would seem to be the result of the grafting of the Anglo-Saxon on good, original, negro stock.” But Huneker does not offer himself to his readers as this sort of comprehensive and harmonious symbol. He explicitly sees himself as a man disorderly, unstable, casual of purpose, ironic, easily bored, for whom versatility was a fortunate concomitant, and he believes that in so being he is *not* like the mass of his countrymen. He associates himself rather with certain Frenchmen, exceptional in their own society, who were superior to the “automatons” that constituted the masses. In *Egoists; A Book of Supermen* (1909) he says approvingly that Maurice Barrès “boldly proclaimed the *culte de moi*, proclaimed his disdain for the barbarians who impinged upon his *I*. To study and note the fleeting shapes of his soul—in his case a protean psyche—was the one thing worth doing in a life of mediocrity.” In *Steeplejack*, again with approval, he quotes Napoleon, whom he calls “the superman of modern times,” to the effect that liberty is necessary only for the few and that nothing is to be said for fraternity “even if you call it by such a high-sounding name as altruism.” And he admires Pascal because he “has always been to me a giant intellect that could believe and disbelieve with equal ease. There *are* such anomalies in the flora and fauna of the human soul.” The admiration of an indifferent shifting from belief to disbelief, and maybe back, was more than incidentally an irreverence to a basic American piety, the piety of commitment to national purposes and ideals.

I drew two conclusions about Huneker. First, he was pleased to be indefinite whereas definition of character and function was the rule among men. Second, while he might use the homely phrase “Yankee versatility,” the significant and truly admirable instances of that power were only public expressions of the private indefiniteness among exceptional people. A Flaubert, a Barrès, or indeed a Huneker did not apportion the expressions of his talents after considering what the public variously wanted. If the public were pleased and if the versatile expressions matched their several tastes, so much the better; if not, so much the worse for the public. For Huneker believed that the rare indeterminate minds were obliged to be and to express only themselves. The masses were ready to brand those minds as pathological if they did not meet common expectations, and the only enduring security lay in the confidence that one’s indefiniteness was supreme health.

These conclusions are fair to Huneker and hardly controversial; not only fair but obvious, partly because they suggest what we already know about the modes of elitism and provocative dilettantism among such of his contemporaries as H. L. Mencken. But for me these conclusions carried

much farther. I realized that in attempting to characterize radical versatility in its typical American manifestations I had been misled by repeated formulations of an issue in terms of one of its practical applications. The basic issue lay between the conditions of an individual's being definite or indefinite; consistent and orderly or inconsistent and confused; willing to submit to identification or insisting upon remaining mysterious; seeing with conventional coherence or seeing kaleidoscopically; becoming somebody or remaining nothing, but never definable though remaining nothing—never specifically a bum, never specifically a criminal; committed to causes or uncommitted without being negative. The polarities go on; I give only samples on the assumption that the issue is so rich and so known to us all that others will occur to you as I continue. The issue is everywhere in our literary culture, but whether it persists because it represents a chronic irresolution among Americans, or because it is a consequence of our being generations in sequence, I cannot say. I call it an issue rather than an antithesis because tendentiousness, crafty ideological disguises both pro and con, fear, jubilation, and loathing are never absent in its representations, and the representations always entail action explicit or implicit. For there are questions intimately involved to everyone who treats the matter: whether the person who is unformed would corrupt youth and subvert public morals; whether being indefinite produces enlightenment or illusion; whether the indefinite personality is the exception or the rule; if the exception, whether he should guide or remain aloof; if the rule, whether everyone should throw off the masks of conventional identities; whether it is possible to remain indefinite against the twin onslaughts of diminishment through biological aging and the societal pressures of family and state. Given the issue and these ramifications, it would be inhuman to expect balanced representations.

To date I have gathered numerous cases in point, not yet enough to be responsibly thorough, but enough for me to feel as disconcerted as the little girl who said plaintively to her mother that she knew how to spell "banana" but didn't know where to stop. I will have time here to produce only some notes toward a myth of the indefinite character in American literature, with illustrations from several writers. In this myth a stable, normal individual abandons his usual way of living, and often leaves the country altogether. The departure is sudden and the truncation complete; in the nineteenth century, a New England Brahmin may sail to the Pacific or travel to the Far West. After his departure he finds among persons he meets, in things he sees, and in himself, a problematic reality of which he was previously unaware. Shipmates and natives of the south Pacific are not the mere ignorant savages of former prejudice. Some of the sailors are unintelligibly both coarse and brilliant, and though the natives remain savages, they have a "savage grace," as Herman Melville puts it in *Typee*, in the sort of benign oxymoron often used to express the interior condition of the indefinite

character and the true nature of the world beyond convention. (One is reminded of Huxley's admiration for Pascal's ability to "believe and disbelieve with equal ease.") In some versions of the myth, especially in the twentieth century, the departure does not involve travel to a locale where this new knowledge is peculiarly available. The departure may be signaled by an interior breaking of the accustomed syntax of memory, association, and purposive reasoning; followed by a voyage of the imagination into astonishing connections with the distant past and into hyperbolic fantasies that are never absurd, never trivial, because they issue from a liberation of the spirit. Thorne Smith's *Cosmo Topper* is a plump forty-year old banker, comfortably married, childless, and inhibited. One afternoon he looks into the eyes of his cat Scollops and discovers "that there were things he did not know, colors of life beyond his comprehension, impulses alien to his reason. With his wife's eyes it was different. He knew their every shade and meaning. . . . He knew the eyes at the office. . . . Now, however, he was alive to the fact that Scollops' eyes escaped all classification." Topper has already let himself go, and now he is prepared for the complete transformation that follows. After he buys the rebuilt automobile in which his friends George and Marion Kerby were killed, their ghosts lead him into frolics and wild debauches. In the course of the fantasy Topper finds that "his brain was quite playful, that it broke rules and was indifferent"; and he feels "a spirit of freedom and buoyancy that had never come to him during his more orderly régime." When the travel in modern versions of the myth is through representational landscapes, it accomplishes through its meandering and aimlessness the surrender of definition. When Ken Kesey and his entourage known as the Merry Pranksters wander from the San Francisco Bay Area down south and on to New York in their psychedelic school bus, wired for tremendous sound, they demonstrate their liberation on the road through antic displays before policemen and service station attendants; no consummation awaits them at the terminus.

The sequel to the departure and voyage is not the return of a culture hero to enact the liberation of his family or society. Even in versions of the myth most sympathetic to indefiniteness, the sequel confirms the intransigence of the conventional world. In Sherwood Anderson's *Many Marriages*, John Webster, a washing-machine manufacturer, loses his routine bearings and feels his body to be "vaguely indefinitely connected with some vast thing," and he senses that at the same time he is standing by his Wisconsin factory, he is both in the American south and by the Sea of Galilee. In a move to complete his transcendence of the limits of self, he allows his puritanical wife and daughter to discover him parading nude before a picture of the Virgin Mary, and while they are in shocked submission he attempts to convert them with a lecture on the health of achieving psychic marriages with everyone and everything, so that one may "become something more than just one individual man and woman living one narrow circumscribed

life." But after the lecture Webster's wife commits suicide, and he leaves town for good with his secretary to protect the enlightenment given in his interior chaos. At the end of *Topper* Cosmo is reunited with his wife, but she does not even know where he has been; his new awarenesses are only his. These and similar endings do not necessarily imply frustration. In part they maintain the place of indefiniteness as a private reserve in a world of form, a condition which for some exponents is required for the chief use of indefiniteness, the creation of experimental art. Such endings also suggest the optative mood and the future reference that are always to be found in sympathetic versions of the myth. One wishes to restore the child mind, like Anderson's John Webster, and one wishes to awaken the child in everyone. Though the general conversions have not occurred, they may follow from the example of late generations. Thus the naturalist John Burroughs, believing that "the angel of light" must be "yoked with the demon of darkness" in order to "sustain the world," recommended the younger Whitman over the older Emerson as a prophet for the nation because Emerson invidiously preferred "the saints to the sinners" whereas Whitman had extraordinary "assimilative powers" and an "indefinite dynamics" (*Birds and Poets*, 1877). And thus in her turn, fifty years later, Isadora Duncan found Whitman too puritanical but called herself a "Pagan Puritan, or a Puritanical Pagan," and she sensed her kind of dance to be the appropriate vehicle to express the "half Aphrodite, half Madonna" she saw in Botticelli's *Primavera* (*My Life*, 1927).

These associations with the latecoming and the future are not commitments to them but are rather ways of expressing a characteristic relation of the indefinite mind to the constraining forces: the condition of being indefinite is always a departure from a precedent obligation or convention. But the indefinite mind is committed to nothing—not to an age, not to a place, or to anything within them. Like Walt Whitman, it is at home with the past as well as the future. Lacking a hierarchy of values and a bias of attention, the indefinite mind delights in present moments, in watching insects or in noting slight changes of natural coloration. The indefinite character may be androgynous, in some modes bisexual, old and young, here, there, and under your bootsoles. If he assumes a particular identity, it is only occasional and protean, adopted for the sake of security to the mess within, and is to be followed by still other guises that dupe conventional perception. In the aesthetic manifestos of this comprehensive and/or zero orientation the reconstitution of media and their products is basic. "Break the words," says William Carlos Williams in *The Great American Novel*; "One can make words. . . . I begin small and make myself into a big splurging word: I take life and make it one big blurb. I begin at my childhood. I begin at the beginning and make one big—Bah." The indefinite mind as artist produces a counter world, and though that world may seem a Pointillism or Surrealism gone crazy, the artist proclaims it to be

more honest than the world of traditional consensus, for it admits to being only an imaginative option, no more so than any other world in art, no more so than the world itself.

All these claims on behalf of indefiniteness in the sympathetic myth may seem to us credulous and narcissistic, and there were doubts and warnings along those lines as far back as Hawthorne, Melville, and T. S. Arthur. In his first book, *Typee* (1846), Melville represented the cultural expansion of an American who jumps ship in the south Pacific. He acquires an “elasticity of mind” that allows him to savor experience like the natives, who are not preoccupied with purpose and for whom time consequently trips along “as the laughing couples down a country lane.” But beginning with his next book, and with increased somberness in his later works, Melville argued that such rejection of stability could be enjoyed only at the cost of becoming a beachcomber like Dr. Long Ghost in *Omoo* or a feckless and unmanned relativist like Plotinus Plinlimmon in *Pierre*. On the other hand, if one attempted to act in the world from a new sense that everyone was ambiguous, the result might be the sort of disaster that comes to Pierre Glendinning. Disoriented by information that his father sired an illegitimate daughter now grown to nubility, Pierre leaves Saddle Meadows, his ancestral estate, abandoning his mother and his fiancée to live with the half sister in New York. Having surrendered his previous identity, Pierre does not know whether his motive is charitable or incestuous or both. The upshot of his departure into indefiniteness is insanity and death to the mother, his murdering a cousin, and the suicides of himself, the fiancée and the half sister. Earlier, in the 119th chapter of *Mardi*, Melville had reached the position that a comprehensive “elasticity of mind” was possible only in dreams. In dreams, but only in dreams, “my soul sinks down to the depths, and soars to the skies. . . . methinks all the worlds are my kin. . . .” At the turn of our century Mark Twain reached the same skeptical conclusion in one of his “Mysterious Stranger” manuscripts. There he imagines a world in which everyone has a Workaday-Self and a Dream-Self. The Workaday-Self is stuck in his flesh and in his responsibilities, and he can be no more than what he does within those constraints. But Mark Twain has one of the Dream-Selves say of his kind: “We have no character, no *one* character, we have *all* characters. . . . The universe is our province; we do not know time, we do not know space. . . .” Again, indefiniteness is a dream phenomenon that the naturalistic facts of life do not support.

The most elaborate fictions criticizing the indefinite character are in W. D. Howells. In his novels *A Modern Instance*, *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, and *The Landlord at Lion's Head* he posited the indefinite characters as shallow upstarts—equivocal, pretentious, and selfish. In the first of these, *A Modern Instance*, Howells gives the central character Bartley Hubbard moments when he fantasizes about following another career than that of the special form of journalism he has drifted into; and when he thinks it might be nice

to take up politics or take on a religion. In Howells's rendering these are the pathetic fancies of a rootless and aimless man, a casual flirt who has let himself be induced into marriage by a possessive woman, an opportunist who does not balk at shady dealing to make a profit. In several respects Howells's Bartley Hubbard anticipates twentieth-century representations of the urban middle class through the figure of a moderately sensual man entering middle age without satisfying achievement and with only brief escapes from tedium and self-contempt through idealistic dreams, fishing trips, and love affairs, like Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*. But what significantly distinguishes Howells from Lewis and other later writers is that Howells deplors Bartley's failure to obey the middle-class code, for all the poignancy in certain passages of interior reflection he gives him. He introduces an exemplary character, Atherton, who in conversations with his wife and with another exemplary character, Ben Halleck, dominates the close of the book with denunciations of Bartley's selfishness, and, in his prospective divorce of the possessive woman, his threat to social order. By the time of the two later novels Howells had lost or repressed even the degree of sympathy he gave Bartley. Angus Beaton, the "versatile" artist in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, is represented as a foppish poseur who tries to make romantic impressions upon the ladies through studied gestures of languor, brooding, and high sentiment. Yet his interior reflections are for the most part the cold calculations of self-interest. And again Howells includes normative characters to define Beaton's behavior not as that of the free, Bohemian spirit he wants to be thought but as an anti-social dereliction. With Thomas Jefferson Durgin, the problematic character of *The Landlord at Lion's Head*, the case is the same. Durgin, the bright son of a woman who runs a summer hotel in Vermont, goes to Harvard to prepare for the law. He leaves behind a fiancée whom he betrays by flirting with a college widow at Cambridge. The respectable artist Westover, an older man who has vacationed at Lion's Head for years and has known Durgin since Durgin's boyhood, is appalled at the flirtation as an example of a cruel selfishness he thinks characteristic of Durgin. In conversations with the fiancée's father the conclusion is reached that Durgin is a "puzzle," a "mixture," and in the father's oxymoronic phrase "a comical devil," a savage who does not belong in society.

Howells's reactions against his own creatures may seem excessive to us even if we take his historical context into account. But whatever ambivalence he may have been trying to resolve or exorcise, he could realistically assume that private behavior affected the public welfare, that civilization was a precarious construct requiring the repeated assent of its members to its codes. Like T. S. Arthur and the generations of clergymen who wrote manuals for young men, Howells believed that individuals could indeed choose not to belong, and that their decision might turn the course of a society still in the process of formation. For the nineteenth century as a

whole one may say that representations of indefinite characters were considerations of the amorphous primordial stuff of individuals, only part of which would be relevant as the new society took definitive shape. Someone like R. H. Dana was enjoying a philosophic deep breath of free awareness before returning to Boston and commitment. Emerson, Whitman, and Burroughs were advocating a permissibility toward all that primordial stuff before it was too late. In the twentieth century criticisms of indefiniteness like Howells's are hard to find. Books of popular instruction no longer argue first principles but tell people how to increase their efficiency by controlling their minds (James L. Mursell, *Streamline Your Mind*, 1936, for example) and how to achieve well-rounded personalities through an economical use of leisure when, as Walter Pitkin claimed, "life begins at forty"—taking for granted in either case one's submission to a rigorous society. In the twentieth century the advocacy of indefiniteness is escapist as well as reconstitutive, and the advocates spend their greatest efforts not in a dialectic, for there no longer needs to be any articulate opposition, but in finding programs to support their advocacy. For some the programs are unprecedented amalgams of Buddhism, radical politics, and bits and pieces of other sorts of doctrines, deliberately put together in ways that confound logical analysis. For others the ideological game is hopeless, and they advocate not a transcendence to a cultural "elasticity of mind," in Melville's phrase, but an organic mind-bending through drugs. But the essential tradition is unchanged. It is the tradition of wishing to be tentative, of not wanting to be an American Adam or anything else in particular, as if life is too short and the world too small to accept them on their own terms.