

the retreat from excellence *

Amy Franks

As I write these words, millions of Americans are completing an average day. Early this morning they awoke, ate breakfast, and drove off to work or school. Soon, they will eat dinner, settle down before the television set, and go to bed to begin the cycle anew. Along the busy streets outside pass streams of faceless, middle-aged men, all overweight and slightly balding, all returning to comfortable, look-alike houses. Young people walk by, identical in the tight clothes and long hair of the "group." All indicate a retreat from excellence. All are part of the vegetable existence we call the American way of life.

Society today is given over to an amiable mediocrity, "Oh, be a good guy," we are urged, not "be a great man." Politicians, newspaper editors, and interviewers of headache sufferers address themselves to the *average* housewife, the *common* man, the *typical* American—terms which would have puzzled a Greek of Plato's day. Radio, television, and other media of communication rigidly define and constantly voice our "ideals." We watch television families who live in the suburbs, rear children, and are generally as average as we. We are told that sparkling teeth and the proper deodorant will bring us popularity, a happy marriage, and success in business. And twenty-four hours a day the radio waves are given over to a mass cult of love, insidiously preparing our children for their role of "typical family man" and "breeder of offspring."

Mass media have made almost a fetish of the trivial. Television housewives sing paeans to laundry detergents and wax ecstatic over the merits of instant coffee. A Los Angeles woman states her opinions on Fluffy Bleach as eloquently as the ancient Greek discussed the nature of truth. The White Tornado, "stronger than dirt," and Mary Mild are more a part of our vocabulary than Plato or Shakespeare. In the realm of art, "pop" and "op" have replaced Rembrandt and the Beatles, Beethoven. An artist now

* Freshman Writing.

throws together a mound of garbage or paints a can of soup, and the world proclaims it a masterpiece. Day and night the radio waves vibrate with an unintelligible wailing and groaning which our teen-agers call "The Sound." The unusual, especially the unusually good, perturbs us; it threatens our complacency and we shun it. Recently, I overheard two boys, indistinguishable under matching Beatle hair cuts, as they walked past a concert hall downtown. "Hey, look—Music Hall," laughed the one. "Yeah, it really turns you on, doesn't it?" rejoined the other. A friend of mine, a dancer, hardly ever speaks now of her interest in ballet. "People used to look at me so 'funny,'" she explains. Certainly, trashy literature would not fill the bookstands, "rock and roll" would not blare so interminably from every jukebox and passing transistor, if there were no demand for them. The consistently high ratings of shows like *The Beverly Hillbillies*, the drawing power of surf and beach movies reflect the tendency of the masses to seek out the second or third-rate and ignore the truly excellent.

Worst of all, we have lost our sense of human brotherhood. "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." How far, how pathetically far, we have strayed from this highest of all ideals. Our newspapers broadcast only callous unconcern for others. *Ten lives lost in Viet Nam attack; Girl, 17, found stabbed, beaten! Hotel burglarized!*—so read the daily headlines. Visiting Cincinnati last autumn, I found not the free and easy city where I grew up, but a stricken shadow, terrorized by a rash of strangulations. Last summer Charles Whitman climbed the tower and opened fire upon a crowd in Dallas, Texas; only weeks before, Richard Speck brutally murdered eight Chicago student nurses. Yet more monstrous than the sick, twisted individual who kills and rapes and robs is the placid society that allows such things to be. Apathy and complacency twine their deadening fingers about every corner of our society. The sluggish, sedentary American cannot walk to the store for a pack of cigarettes, nor even, as recent elections show, arouse himself to vote. Overfed, anesthetized by comforts and luxuries, we have lost the energy to act, the will to reach out and touch one another. On a New York sidewalk a woman bleeds to death while twenty people watch, and "noninvolvement" takes on a new and awful meaning. Like molecules whirling aimlessly through space, we pass and meet and bump, but do not join.

Yes, we have retreated from excellence. And yet, for all the

triviality and mediocrity and conformity of our society, the situation is not entirely hopeless. Here and there sensitive people are taking a stand against the second-rate and demanding higher standards of our society. While floundering in trivia, television has attempted to raise the quality of its broadcasts with beautifully done specials, serious drama, and informative documentaries. Leonard Bernstein, Helen Hayes, and Bishop Sheen represent an element among us still dedicated to the pursuit of excellence. Will the energizing presence of the few awaken society from its lethargy? Or will the dull, dead weight of the masses crush out, at last, the few, faint-burning embers of inspiration? Only the future will tell.

the alley

Diane Steinfeld

Hope walked home slowly. She had to collect her thoughts. She couldn't let her family see how hurt and angry she really was. It wasn't their fault anyway. It had been all her idea to take a night course at the university. She had saved what she could from her small paycheck until finally she had just enough to sign up for one course. She had talked to her newly-appointed college advisor and he had said, "Take sociology. Learn about people. Know the world in which you are living. It's the basis of everything." So sociology it was. Tonight had been her first class.

The January night air felt cool on Hope's face as she walked. It was a welcome relief from that hot, embarrassed feeling she had suffered through her class. It was a large class, forty or fifty. All the older women were dressed in expensive tailored suits, and the girls Hope's age were in rich-looking sweater and skirt outfits. Even the men had a distinguished, sophisticated air about them. She felt so dowdy in her cheap cotton dress that she took a seat in the