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CHAPTER 1

Loomings (1927-29)

Do you know any optimistic historians? There aren't many. Spend almost any length of time studying the past, and the rosier conclusion you'll come to is that our record is, well, mixed. Every time we take a hundred steps forward, we take ninety-nine back, and it's unclear where the next one is going to land.

For every scholar willing to claim that, say, the 1950s were a "great" era in American history, when the income gap closed and opportunity knocked at everyone's door, a hundred others will remind you that not everyone had a door, that there was a war in Korea, that some veterans were drinking too much and beating their wives, that women were kept from the workforce, that African Americans were kept from voting, that children grew up with air-raid drills, that artists were blacklisted and intellectuals jailed for controversial opinions, that synagogues were bombed, that radiation and toxic chemicals were seeping into everyone's bodies.

But pessimism does not exclude the possibility of hope—because history teaches that things do shift. The most dour among us will argue that all change just represents entropy, the inevitable drift toward further chaos. But then why didn't Nature reclaim our cities centuries ago? Yes, we are part of the chaos, but we also sometimes struggle against it: we create culture, make meaning, insist on ideals like liberty, equality, and solidarity, sometimes with startling, unpredictable success.

Lewis Mumford's first book, published in 1922, just before he turned twenty-seven, was *The Story of Utopias*. It was, of course, a story of failure, because Utopia is an impossible dream. But the point was the value

of the dreaming, the restless striving toward collective thriving, the determined envisioning of alternatives to hierarchy and domination. If there was no such thing as a perfect place, there could at least be a “good place,” which Mumford sometimes referred to as “*eutopia*,” drawing on the Greek root in words like eulogy and euphonious. And he argued that our collective “will-to-eutopia” was in fact the only thing preventing society’s disintegration. Predictably, for the rest of his life, Mumford would have to fend off the label of dreamy Utopian, and that drove him crazy. In his 1940 book, *Faith for Living*, he included an entire chapter called “Life Is Better than Utopia,” and when he issued a new edition of *The Story of Utopias* in 1962 he cantankerously reminded his readers that “my utopia is actual life.” What he always returned to was the need, in any half-decent society, to protect people’s ability to protest and resist, to contest dominant values, which so often serve merely to keep the powerful in power: “Unlike utopian writers, I must find a place in any proposed scheme for challenge and opposition and conflict.”¹

In short, to be a eutopian meant to believe in the constant, open renegotiation of what the good society should be, in the face of stiffening conventions and constraints—meant embracing hope, despite ever-looming “Ordeals of Reality.” That’s another chapter title, from the very last book Mumford published, just before the onset of dementia; it referred to the period when he was writing his Melville biography, from 1927 to 1929.

He had started work on the Melville project under congenial circumstances: summer, Martha’s Vineyard, with his wife, Sophia, and their two-year-old son, in “a shabby little shack” they had rented, “on a lonely heath.” The sea was their “constant companion,” washing against the cliffs, “whispering or roaring, soothing or threatening, advancing or retreating”; nearby was an ancient, tree-lined farm worked by two elderly women. Mumford delighted in the flow and ebb, the stimulation and repose of the landscape: “a ridge of sandy cliffs, skirting the shores for a couple of miles until they sank into dunes, marked the abrupt end of the land, and at the bottom of these cliffs we sunned ourselves and bathed.”²

It was a refuge, a retreat: many members of the Lost Generation escaped the trauma of the Great War by immersing themselves in nature and seeking inspiration from the past. Up to this point, Mumford had been ensconced in New York City, and he still lived there in the fall,

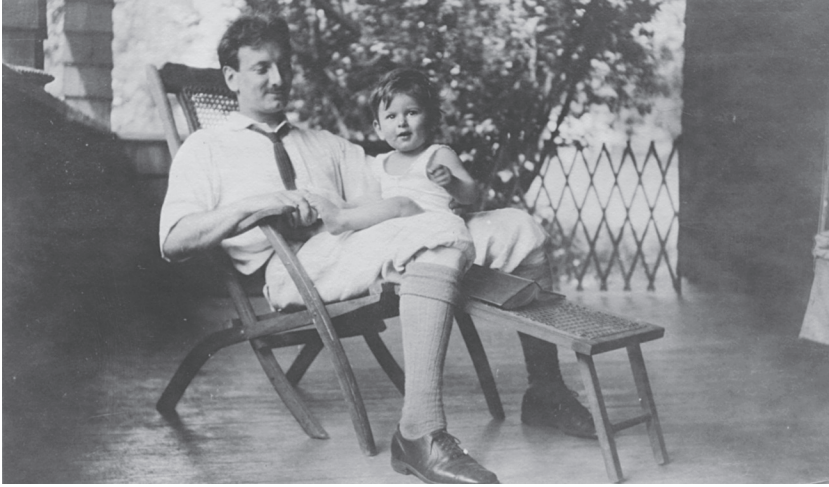


FIGURE 1. Lewis and Geddes Mumford in 1926 or 1927.

winter, and spring, but in his writing, throughout the 1920s, he had already begun to search historical landscapes for ways of transcending his life amid skyscrapers and offsetting his society's fixation on power and conquest. Unlike most 1920s intellectuals, though, who generally looked to Europe for alternatives to the conservatism dominating the United States, Mumford dove ever deeper into American cultural history.³

After *The Story of Utopias* he published *Sticks and Stones: A Study of American Architecture and Civilization* (1924), in which he proposed the classic Massachusetts village as the embodiment of a highly "intelligent partnership between the earth and man."⁴ Then, in his breakthrough book, *The Golden Day: A Study in American Literature and Culture* (1926), Mumford wrote even more yearningly of old New England, celebrating the efflorescence of imagination in the 1840s and 1850s, noting the outdoor energy of antebellum poetry and prose, the embrace of both science and art, modernity and timelessness. *The Golden Day* established writers like Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Hawthorne, Poe, and Melville as the archetypal American geniuses, sparking a new scholarly movement to appreciate what we now call "The American Renaissance."⁵ The clear heroes of that book were Emerson and Whitman, and either could easily have served as the subject of a new biography. But Mumford chose Melville.

Perhaps he wanted to embrace tragedy as openly as possible, to shake off the public's perception that he was primarily a nostalgic utopian. Perhaps he truly craved a dose of darkness, found it exhilarating to follow Melville in a "flight . . . over an unconquered and perhaps an unconquerable abyss." Or perhaps he wanted to redeem Melville: "his perplexities, his defiances, his torments, his questions, even his failures, all have a meaning for us."⁶

Certainly, he wished to contribute to the revival that had been initiated by Raymond Weaver's book of 1921, *Herman Melville: Mariner and Mystic*. Mumford agreed with Weaver that Melville was "distinctly modern" and that his tragic sensibility was deeply relevant to the post–Great War world.⁷ But he was also eager to revise Weaver's accounting of the second half of Melville's life.

To Weaver, the great author's final four decades, from 1851 (after *Moby-Dick* was published in November) until his death in 1891, seemed an utter waste—years of bitter withdrawal, disillusioned sterility, perhaps even mental illness. Yes, he wrote a few poems, but, as Weaver put it, "his signal literary achievement was done. The rest, if not silence, was whisper." After devoting 350 pages to that early achievement, Weaver tacked on one final chapter, called "The Long Quietus," to cover Melville's whispering defeat, even referring to *The Confidence-Man*, published in 1857, as "a posthumous work."⁸

Mumford read Weaver's book in the fall of 1927, and paused in his research notes to record his outrage: "Weaver, to support his melodramatic thesis, puts forty years into forty pages."⁹ When Mumford's biography of Melville came out, it gave three times as much space to those final four decades, and the last chapter of the book was called, pointedly, "The Flowering Aloe."¹⁰ Indeed, Mumford insisted not only that Melville had written some beautiful, poignant poetry in his later years but also that he had stumbled onto a kind of "peace": especially during the 1870s and 1880s, "Melville found life, not good or bad, malicious or forbearing, true or false. Something more important had happened: he found it livable."¹¹

Mumford had been through his own crucible from about 1915 until 1925, when he was in his twenties, struggling with his marriage, with vague but debilitating illnesses, with his conviction that he was destined

to write plays and poetry, with a tangled relationship to his overbearing intellectual mentor, Patrick Geddes. But once he started work on *The Golden Day* and once Sophia gave birth to their first child (named Geddes) in July 1925, Mumford came into a new confidence. He saw Melville as the ultimate challenge. Until that point, Mumford believed, “I had never pushed myself to my limits,” but by confronting Melville’s “dark life story,” he thought he could convey “the lesson of a noble defiance.”¹² On Martha’s Vineyard, in the summer of 1927, islanded, surrounded by the sounds of the sea, he took great pleasure in getting “a drenching in the nakedness of natural scenes, natural forces, natural acts.”¹³ He seemed to assume that his “sanguine disposition,” his “naturally buoyant temperament,” would help him resurface after he went plunging after Melville into “those cold black depths, the depths of the sunless ocean.”¹⁴

But the writing process is fickle, unpredictable: “I could not guess then that Melville’s tragic exploration of his depths would in time unbare parts of my own life which I had never been ready to face.”¹⁵ By the fall of 1928, as Mumford was finishing the biography, he found himself grappling with “problems, pressures, bafflements, and emotional cross-currents of my own similar to those I was probing in Melville.”¹⁶ Apparently there was a “deeper parallel” than he had realized: he had found a “brother spirit.”¹⁷ And this sudden identification would evolve into his lifelong obsession not only with Melville but with the darkness of his own soul, and of human history.

As both the year and his book drew to a close, Mumford found that his “energies were badly depleted,” and he began hoping he would fall ill, just so he would have an excuse to rest.¹⁸ “In a verse I addressed to Melville . . . , I pictured my relation to him, ‘a sick man,’ as that of a nurse, watching by his bedside, tending him through the fever that brought him almost to death. In that office, I poured my sunlight upon him, only to find myself being swallowed up by his blackness, falling with him into chasms no light of mine could ever penetrate. Before that vigil was over, I wrote, ‘the weakened nurse became the patient: I watched the fever take possession of my bones.’”¹⁹ Even his marriage began to falter again, as Sophia suffered a miscarriage and expressed jealousy over Lewis’s attentions to their neighbor Helen Ascher, a “dark,

sensuous” woman (Lewis’s words) who lived nearby both in New York and on Martha’s Vineyard and who was married but known for having many lovers.²⁰ And then, as Mumford put it, “with a kind of Melvillian fatality both Sophia and I from November on went through the most desolate year of our whole lifetime until our son’s death in 1944.”²¹ As Mumford paced along New York avenues, he sometimes “composed obituaries, nice ones, written in the New Republic style, about myself.”²² It was, as Ishmael would say, “a damp, drizzly November” in his soul.²³

By May 1929, Mumford should have been celebrating his book’s publication, but instead, at the age of thirty-three, he was reading Dante and imagining himself lost in the darkest of forests—in a purgatory. His son had been in the hospital for months after barely surviving surgery for a double mastoid, which had come close to infecting his brain, and Lewis would be haunted by the boy’s feverish wails for the rest of his life. He felt he had experienced “one of the deepest torments a human being can know: his utter helplessness, as in a nightmare, to save the person he loves from mortal injury.”²⁴ Now he was actively considering an affair with Helen, and he suspected that Sophia was already seeing another man: “we felt inwardly estranged, with nothing in common except our distance from each other.” By July, the adjective “Melvillian” had entered his lexicon to stay (though with two different spellings). “The inner me has never been worse,” he wrote, in his private notes. “For the last few days I have been conscious of a bleak, Melvillean feeling of despair: vast, blank, senseless, but unaccountably desperate. His image is bad medicine; and when I am feeling down I begin to regret that I had anything to do with him.”²⁵

Melville, it turned out, was Mumford’s white whale. But did that make him Ishmael or Ahab?

The biography did reasonably well at first, and was selected for the Literary Guild’s new paperback series. That provided a nice windfall. But sales dried up a few months later. On October 19, Mumford turned thirty-four. On October 29, the stock market collapsed, launching what would become the Great Depression. No one cared about white whales after Black Tuesday.

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