

# D R E A M T I M E O F

## FIRST PLACE

ESSAY CONTEST WINNER

Vince Carducci

To us and all those who hate us, that the U.S.A. will become just another part of the world, no more, no less.

**John Cage**

“This country is a spread of localities,” the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey wrote of America in 1920. Whether he intended to or not, Dewey was heralding the aesthetic of the American Scene, which prevailed in art, music, and literature particularly in the period between the two World Wars. The American Scene sought to align cultural production with democratic principles, calling for representation to reflect the indigenous conditions from which it sprang and toward which it was directed. It went into hibernation in the waning moments of the Second World War as the United States awoke to its calling as a global superpower. In its place, a universalizing cultural impulse emerged, expressing itself in many forms.

The International Style in architecture and design embraced the grid as the basic structural element and adopted the smooth, spare surfaces of the “form-follows-function” aesthetic to project a cultural ideal not bound by any specific place or time. In the social sciences, structural-functionalism emerged, which sought to discover the general laws underlying all forms of human organization and interaction. Talcott Parsons’s magnum opus *The Social System* (Free Press, 1951) delineated the values of “particularism” and “universalism,” the latter being the repository of norms and other drivers of social integration existing outside and prior to individual cathetic expression. In the domestic economy, regional markets were incorporated under what historian Lizabeth Cohen terms the “Consumers’ Republic” - a brave new and improved world of tailfins, push buttons, branded packaged goods, and mass broadcast and print media uniformly delivered on the national level. On the political and cultural fronts, consensus prevailed in the orthodoxy of the “vital center,” somewhat paradoxically linking individualism in the domestic arena and hegemonic capitalism internationally against the threat of Communism.

In the visual arts, universalism was manifested in the formalist tenets of high modernism, which declared art a project of revealing each medium’s essential conditions; in the case of painting, for example, the flatness of the two-dimensional picture plane. The paragon of this theory in the immediate postwar era was the style generally known as abstract expressionism, which was held to be everything that the American Scene was not. It was nonobjective and

