Is America Falling Apart?
(abridged) by Anthony Burgess

I am back in Bracciano, a castellated town about 13 miles north of Rome, after a year in New Jersey. I find the Italian Government still unstable, gasoline more expensive than anywhere in the world, butchers and bank clerks and tobacconists ready to go on strike at the drop of a hat, neo-fascists at their dirty work, the hammer and sickle painted on the rumps of public statues, a thousand-lira note (officially worth about $1.63) shrunk to the slightness of a dollar.

Nevertheless, it’s delightful to be back. People are underpaid but they go through an act of liking their work, the open markets are luscious with esculent color, the community is important than the state, the human condition is humorously accepted. The northern wind blows viciously today, and there's no central heating to turn on, but it will be pleasant when the wind drops. The two television channels are inadequate, but next Wednesday's return of an old Western is something to look forward to. Manifold consumption isn't important here. The quality of life has nothing to do with the quantity of brand names. What matters is talk, family, cheap wine in the open air, the wresting of minimal sweetness out of the long-known bitterness of livings. I was spoiled in New Jersey.

In New Jersey, I never had to shiver by a fire that wouldn't draw, or go without canned food. America made me develop new appetites in order to make proper use of the supermarket. A character in Evelyn Waugh's Put out More Flags said that the difference between prewar and postwar life was that, prewar, if one thing went wrong the day was ruined; postwar, if one thing went right the day would be made. America is a prewar country, psychologically unprepared for one thing to go wrong. Hence the neurosis, despair, the Kafka feeling that the whole marvelous fabric of American life is coming apart at the seams.

Let us stay for a while on this subject of consumption. American individualism, on the face of it an admirable philosophy, wishes to manifest itself in independence of the community. You don't share things in common; you have your own things. A family's strength is signalized by its possessions. Herein lies a paradox. For the desire for possessions must eventually mean dependence on possessions. Freedom is slavery. Once let the acquisitive instinct burgeon," and there are ruggedly individual forces only too ready to make it come to full and monstrous blossom. New appetites are invented; what to the European are bizarre luxuries become, to the American, plain necessities.

During my year's stay in New Jersey I let my appetite flower into full Americanism except for one thing. I did not possess an automobile. This self-elected deprivation was a way into the nastier side of the consumer society. Where private ownership) prevails, public amenities decay or are prevented from coming into being. The run-down rail services of America are something I try, vainly, to forget. The nightmare of filth, outside and in, that enfolds the trip from Springfield, Mass., to Grand Central Station would not be accepted in backward Europe. But far worse is the nightmare of travel in and around Los Angeles, where public transport does not exist and people are literally choking to death in their exhaust fumes. This is part of the price of individual ownership.

But if the car owner can ignore the lack of public transport, he can hardly ignore the decay of services in general. His car needs mechanics, and mechanics grow more expensive and less efficient. The gadgets in the home are cheaper to replace than repair. The more efficiently self-contained the home seems to be, the more dependent it is on the great impersonal corporations, as well as a
diminishing army of servitors. Skills at the lowest level have to be wooed
slavishly and exorbitantly rewarded. Plumbers will not come. Nor, at the higher
level, will doctors. And doctors and dentists know their scarcity value and
behave accordingly. Americans are at last realizing that the acquisition of goods
is not the whole of life. Consumption, on one level, is turning insipid, especially
as the quality of the goods seems to be deteriorating. Planned obsolescence is
not conducive to pride in workmanship. On another level, consumption is
turning sour. There is a growing guilt about the masses of discarded
junk—rusting automobiles and refrigerators and washing machines and
dehumidifiers—that it is uneconomical to recycle. Indestructible plastic hasn’t
even the grace to undergo chemical change. America, the world's biggest
consumer, is the world's biggest polluter. Awareness of this is a kind of
redemptive grace, but it has not led to repentance and a revolution in consumer
habits. Citizens of Los Angeles are horrified by the daily nail of golden smog,
but they don't noticeably clamor for a decrease in the number of owner-vehicles.
There is no worse neurosis than that which derives from a consciousness of guilt
and an inability to reform.

It would be unnecessary for me to list those areas in which thoughtful
Americans feel that collapse is coming. It is enough for me to concentrate on
education. America has always despised its teacher; and, as a consequence, it has
been granted the teachers it deserves. The quality of first-grade education that
my son received, in a New Jersey town noted for the excellence of its public
schools, could not, I suppose, be faulted on the level of dogged
conscientiousness. The teachers worked rigidly from the approved rigidly
programmed primers. But there seemed to be no spark, no daring, no madness,
no readiness to engage the individual child's mind as anything other than raw
material for statistical reductions. The fear of being orthodox is rooted in the
American teacher's soul; you can be fit for treading the path of experimental
enterprises.

I know that American technical genius, and most of all moon landing,
seems to give the lie to too summary a condemnation of the educational system,
but there is more to education than segmental equipping of the mind. There is
that transmission of value of the past as a force still miraculously fertile and
moving—mostly absent from American education at all levels.

Of course, America was built on a rejection of the past. Even the basic
Christianity which was brought to the continent in 1620 was of a novel and
bizarre kind. And now America, filling in the vacuum left by the liquefied
British Empire, has the task of showing the best thing to the rest of the world.
The best thing can only be money-making and consumption for its own sake. In
the name of this ghastly creed the jungle must be defoliated.

No wonder thoughtful Americans feel guilty and want to take all the blame
they can find. "What do Europeans really think of us?" is a common question at
parties. The expected answer is: "They think you're a load of decadent,
gross-lipped, potbellied, callous, overbearing neo-imperialists." But the fact is
that such an answer, however much desired, would not be an honest one.
Europeans think more highly of Americans now than they ever did. Let me
explain why.

When Europe had sunk to the level of sewer, America became the golden
dream, the Eden where innocence could be recovered. Original sin was the
monopoly of that dirty continent over there. In America, progress was possible,
and the wrongs committed against the Indians, the wildlife, the land itself, could
be explained away in terms of the rational control of environment necessary for
the building of a New Jerusalem. Morally there were only right and wrong; evil had no place in America.

At last, with the Vietnam War, Americans are beginning to realize that they are subject to original sin as much as Europeans are. Some things—the massive crime figures, for instance—can now be explained only in terms of absolute evil. America is no longer Europe's daughter nor her rich stepmother. She is Europe's sister. The agony that America is undergoing is not to be associated with breakdown as much as with the parturition of self-knowledge.

It has been assumed that the youth of America has been in the vanguard of the discovery of both the disease and the cure. The various escapist movements, however, have committed the gross error of assuming that original sin rested with their elders, their rulers, and that they themselves could manifest their essential innocence by building little neo-Edens. The drug culture could confirm that the paradisal vision was available to all who sought it. But instant ecstasy has to be purchased, like any other commodity, and, in economic terms, that passive life involves parasitism. Practically all of the crime I encountered in New York was a preying of the opium-eaters on the working community. There has to be the snake in paradise. You can't escape it he heritage of human evil by building communes, usually on an agronomic ignorance that does violence to life. The American young are well-meaning but misguided, and must not themselves be taken as guides.

The guides, as always, lie among the writers and artists. And Americans ought to note that, however things may seem to be falling apart, arts and the humane scholarship are flourishing here. I'm not suggesting that writers and artists have the task of finding a solution to the American mess, but they can at least clarify its nature and show how it relates to the human condition in general. Literature often reacts magnificently to ambience of unease, or apparent breakdown.

I am not suggesting that Americans sit back and wait for a transient period of mistrust and despair to resolve itself. Americans living here and now have a right to an improvement in the quality of their lives, and they themselves must do something about it. It is not right that men and women should fear to go on the street at night, and that they should sometimes fear the police as much as the criminals, both of whom sometimes look like mirror images of each other. There are too many guns about, and the disarming of the police should be a natural aspect of the disarming of the entire citizenry.

American politics, at both the state and the Federal levels, is too much concerned with the protection of large fortunes. The wealth qualification for the aspiring politician is taken for granted; a govern-mental system dedicated to the promotion of personal wealth in a few selected areas will never act for the public good. (The time has come, nevertheless, for citizens to demand, from their government, amenities for the many, of which adequate state pensions and sickness benefits, as well as nationalized transport, should be priorities.)

This angst about America coming apart at the seams, which apparently is shared by nearly 50 per cent of the entire American population, is something to rejoice about. A sense of sin is always admirable, though it must not be allowed to become neurotic. I ask the reader to note that I, an Englishman who no longer lives in England and can't spend more than six months (at a stretch to any other European country, home to America as to a country more stimulating than depressing. I brave the brutality and the guilt in order to be on the scene. I shall be back.