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America

Main Currents in American Thought,
Volume III

Vernon Louis Parrington

With a new introduction by **Bruce Brown**

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VERNON LOUIS PARRINGTON

THE sudden death of Professor Vernon Louis Parrington in England, June 16, 1929, cut tragically short his labors on the last volume of *Main Currents in American Thought*. Of this third volume approximately the first half had been completed, which, together with the outline of the work and some scattered essays in sections otherwise undeveloped, constitutes all that the author left. Unfinished it is, yet no completion by another can be justified. That anyone could duplicate his felicity of style, so unobtrusively individual, so sensitively adjusted to the freighted thought, is hardly to be hoped for; and more important, that another scholar could accurately reproduce his interpretation is an assumption not to be warranted. The decision to publish the author's incomplete work is a tribute to his brilliance.

Nevertheless it is possible to know Professor Parrington's chief intentions, particularly when one understands, as his associates did, his principles for organizing materials and his standards of value. Students as well as associates first of all noticed beneath the richness and complexity of his thought a constancy of purpose as clear as the treatment of mass in a Gothic cathedral. Indeed it was through a delight in architecture pursued as a hobby for many years that Parrington expressed this desire for a unity, balanced, harmonious, and properly proportioned.

This architectonic feeling, abundantly illustrated in his writing habits, was carried over not only into his classroom procedure and conversation, but also into his varied interests. Painting as well as architecture had long intrigued him. Though few people knew it, he wrote poetry distinguished for restraint in expression and clarity of form; while in conversation he persistently sought the appropriate phrase, spiced it with wit, salted it with homely realism; for no gentleman of the eighteenth century was more conscious of the charms of good discourse.

Professor Parrington's classroom procedure had a reputation that attracted students not much interested in literature and which appealed to all ranges of intellect. The source of that popularity

was the personality of the teacher, together with his gift for presenting ideas and evoking a response. By means of a Socratic cross-examination Parrington made the student discover his intellectual deficiencies; while the class, to its astonishment and delight, found the quest for truth both elusive and exciting. Surprise and satisfied expectation kept the easily bored from sinking into apathy, for there was no telling from day to day just what Professor Parrington was going to do. He paired every occasion with a fitting response; yet this flexibility did not degenerate into an aimless drifting, since he persistently simplified his main objectives and concentrated the material to be studied, while expressing its meaning through a significant symbol or a telling phrase. His classes in the eighteenth century, for example, were given the concept of harmony, balance, and proportion. They found it in architecture, they saw it in dress, they heard it in conversation, they watched it work out in the heroic couplet, they pursued it in Addison, Pope, and Swift; in short, they analyzed the whole social structure of the age and discovered it everywhere. A germinal idea, Parrington liked to call it, while he held it before the class like a many-faceted crystal, slowly turning it around and around so the student could see every face. As a result no student who had taken the course ever forgot the significance of this architectonic trilogy.

In writing habits there was a similar all-encompassing purpose. He habitually began with his thesis—a phrase, a sentence, or a revealing figure. This was examined and stripped of its implications as one would peel an onion layer by layer. So imperious was the habit of this procedure that his ability to write would be blocked until he had in mind a perfectly crystallized concept expressible at the maximum in one sentence. An example of this occurred shortly before he left on his trip to England. He had been working on the period that Mark Twain had labeled the “Gilded Age,” but found the title inadequate to his idea, and, as a result, his writing did not get on. Another day some weeks later there was an obvious satisfaction expressed in his bearing and an exceptionally pronounced twinkle in his eye. “I have found the phrase,” he said; “I will call it *The Great Barbecue*.” Similarly, the three volumes of this work began in a single paragraph which by progressive unfoldings he expanded to its present scope.

After having made a provisional outline, with each section condensed into a single sentence, he began writing, completing a unit

here or there as circumstance and mood directed. When it was completed the process of readjustment began. Each portion was inspected for its length, which had to be fitted to its relative importance; an emphasis here was shifted to balance an emphasis there; the mood of one part was altered to make it harmonize with the mood of its neighbor. As many as twelve times he rewrote a single section in this complex and delicate effort for harmonious adjustment. Finally, he made from this his finished outline.

Knowing Professor Parrington's methods one can now understand the problem he faced and the solution he found when bent on the task of writing a history of American literature. Although he was by nature partial to the claims of aesthetics, yet it was obvious to him that such an approach was foredoomed to failure. All too few of the American writers would deserve treatment on any aesthetic test, while many who were undeniably significant could not possibly be left out even though inferior artistically. Moreover, one only had to look at the numerous attempts already made to see the failure of the belletristic interpretation. What were these histories of American literature? Sprawling lists of names arranged in a fashion that gave little save conventionalized data and some dubious evaluations. Already there was a widespread demand for a new interpretation growing out of these past failures.

Professor Parrington found the first step to a solution when he remembered the day he opened Taine's *Histoire de la littérature anglaise*. It had come as a new and inspiring discovery to find a method that envisaged the literature of a people as the inevitable outgrowth of their racial peculiarities, environment, and epoch. It is true that the claim set up by Taine, that his method was scientific and could account for every phenomenon, proved to be unfounded; but nevertheless his work was epoch-making; it gave a unity and a significance never before attained, and this was what attracted Parrington. Nothing less unifying than Taine's method was thinkable.

A second source of inspiration came from a close friend and colleague, J. Allen Smith, another pioneer figure, who applied to the abstract theorizings of political science the economic realities that underlie and determine them. The method was so fruitful of results that it quickly spread to a group of American political scientists, from whose findings much of Parrington's significant work received its first flattering confirmation. Under such a stimu-

lus Parrington was quick to realize the fruitfulness of economic determinism when applied even to literature.

A third idea completed the synthesis. When he envisaged American literature as American thought, the trammel of the belletristic was broken and he was free to reëvaluate American writers, to follow the trail of their work wherever it led; for at last he had found a method true to facts, yet one which would satisfy his insatiable demand for a significant unity, balanced, harmonious, and properly proportioned. The economic forces imprint their mark upon political, social, and religious institutions; literature expresses the result in its thought content.

But a technique, though vitally necessary, is not the end of the story. There still remains, even for the most impartial scholar, the final and, be it admitted, inescapable evaluation. Parrington was too honest with himself to dodge the issue; he made his choice and abided the result. In the foreword to the first volume he made his confession: "The point of view from which I have endeavored to evaluate the materials is liberal rather than conservative, Jeffersonian rather than Federalistic; and very likely in my search I have found what I went forth to find, as others have discovered what they were seeking. Unfortunately the *mens aequa et clara* is the rarest of attributes, and dead partisanship has a disconcerting way of coming to life again in the pages of their historians. That the vigorous passions and prejudices of the time I have dealt with may have found an echo in my judgments is, perhaps, to be expected; whether they have distorted my interpretation and vitiated my analysis is not for me to determine."

Professor Parrington's *Main Currents in American Thought* has, then, for its subject the adventures of American liberalism. To anyone alive to the issue an adventurous story it is, as becomes more apparent when the author's own liberalism is completely understood. Those sections where his sympathies are kindled, where he stamps his seal of enthusiastic admiration, provide the clue which his treatment of Roger Williams, Benjamin Franklin, Tom Paine, Jefferson, Emerson, Thoreau, Channing, and Theodore Parker assuredly verifies. All of his latent enthusiasms burst into bloom until, as in his essay on Roger Williams, nothing less than the cadence and passion of the Song of Solomon would express it. "Running through his writings is a recurrent echo of the Hebrew love-song that Puritan thought suffused with glowing mysticism:

'I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine: he feedeth among the lilies. . . . I will arise now, and go about the city in the streets, and in the broad ways I will seek him whom my soul loveth.' But when he went into the broad ways of Carolinian England, seeking the rose of Sharon and the lily of the valley, he discovered only abominations. The lover was tempted by false kisses; the Golden Image was set up in the high places, and the voice of authority commanded to bow down to it. And so as a Christian mystic Roger Williams became a Separatist, and set his mind upon the new world where the lover might dwell with his bride."¹

The liberalism of Parrington had this great virtue, which all too many creeds lack: it was built on an obligation first to examine and understand all points of view before exercising the right to condemn them. Although he disliked the personalities and groaned at the dreary pages of men like Cotton Mather, yet he was not satisfied until he got at their marrow. And again there was an abiding sense of the humane in Parrington before which all abstractions, generalizations, and logical systems had to pass in review. He feared above all, as did the sensitive Jefferson, the cancer of power. "Man," he used to say, "has never proved himself worthy of an unrestrained control of his fellows, nor has any special group of men ever been dominant without injustice to others." Combined with this love of freedom was an urbanity and a sense of personal integrity not subject to the interference of outside forces in convention or mob—an integrity which so impressed everyone having contact with the man, that he has been often called an aristocrat. Parrington would not have objected to the label, nor have seen it as contradictory to the principles of liberalism, since in his opinion only liberalism expressing itself in a democratic society provides for the free exercise of personal rights. Elevating oneself by riding on the shoulders of others, a common device of the pseudo-aristocrat, was to him but a vulgar gymnastic performance.

When he described Jefferson "with his aristocratic head set on a plebeian frame"² he was unconsciously describing himself, for there was a deep love of the soil in Parrington. One saw it, surprisingly, in his hands. They were thick and sturdy, blunted at the ends as if from too much delving into the black loam of his flower garden, where roses, peonies, and crocuses were cherished companions, and the delight of his leisure hours. He secretly suspected

¹ Vol. I, p. 65.

² *Ibid.*, p. 343.

the apartment dweller as any true farmer would; and though there was a twinkle in his eye when he called New York a Babylon or spoke of its corrupting influence on scholar and artist, yet there was a meaning implied more serious than the jest.

It was Parrington's hope to vindicate this liberalism "stemming," as he said, "from the fruitful loins of the eighteenth century." As he diagnosed it, that era had two creative currents of thought: a hopeful, vigorous liberalism, together with a sturdy realism which did not balk at men's selfishness or deny the economic basis of social forces. Unfortunately the nineteenth-century liberal attended only to hopes and neglected the realism, while the swelling forces of industrialism accepted the economic realities but cynically brutalized them. Failure was the inevitable result; the liberals despair while Babbitt, regnant, infests the country with his blustering agents. In the unfinished section of this last volume it was Parrington's purpose to show this parlous state of twentieth-century America, to discern the hopeful gleam in the darkness, and to uncover the hidden forces working for a more stable and just society. Parrington's point of view then, was that of a staunch and kindly liberalism, the motif in the three volumes, the theme never absent from a page of the whole composition. It is a liberalism not to be found, in any program yet formulated by political party or economic sect; it is rather a generous idealism that can envisage a future richer in values, more humane in distribution of favors than any known past. Wise to the ways of man, such a liberalism refuses confinement in the strait-jacket of any set formula, yet escapes the emasculation awaiting mere enthusiasm; for it can separate foes from friends and recognize the point where compromise means surrender.

If my analysis thus far is to any purpose it will suggest what these main objectives that Parrington never completed were to have been. The unfinished Book Two was to chronicle three parties of revolt against the plutocracy born of the Gilded Age. Of these rebellions the first was engendered on the Middle Border, where the farmers, beset by hard times, struck out against the source of their ills. As the agrarians diagnosed the situation, these economic maladjustments were brought on by a currency manipulated for the benefit of creditors, and further enhanced by capitalistic control of the political machine. One of the last of Parrington's completed units deals with the economic phase of the revolt; the next

section was to record the farmer's effort to democratize the government. Through pressure of third-party movements the farmers tried to inject such reforms as the initiative and referendum, the recall, the direct primary, and the income tax; until, seduced by Bryan's oratory, they joined with the Democrats in an attack upon the intrenchments of capitalism. As Parrington saw it, these agrarian descendants of Jefferson, lacking the intellectual leadership which the South had contributed in earlier days, at a tactical disadvantage, and already a minority economic group, were fated to lose their last great uprising.

Also out of the valley of the Mississippi came a literature of the Middle Border. Such writers as Edward Eggleston and E. W. Howe had already initiated a realism that revealed the drabness of frontier life and suggested its smoldering discontent, although the pastoral note fathered by the genial and romantic James Whitcomb Riley did not lack its prose children. Notably did Meredith Nicholson, William Allen White, and Booth Tarkington³ portray the village neighborliness, its wholesomeness, its spirit of democracy, until they cast such a fog of sentiment over the scene as to blur all the realities. But the true spirit of Populism is represented in the impassioned work of Hamlin Garland, whose "admirable realism and passionate democracy" Parrington depicts in a chapter that he completed.

The second chorus of dissent came from the very citadels of plutocracy, for the wage-earners, unable to escape slavery by flight to an unshackled frontier that no longer existed, were brought to bay. The doctrine of class war, which had been ignored since the eighteenth century, was revived by the German socialists and given an added plausibility by the employers' unscrupulous use of injunction, black list, and lockout. T. V. Powderly, who found a solution to the labor problem in syndicalism, organized the Knights of Labor. Although this union had a promising inception, it was soon wrecked, while the craft unionism recommended by Samuel Gompers forged to the front because of its middle-class ideology and spirit of compromise. On the other hand the left wing of the labor cause embraced various brands of socialism. The tragic flare-up of the Haymarket riot, which resulted in a "red" scare and persecution of the humane Governor Altgeld, served Parrington as a dramatic illustration of the obloquy that descended upon the

³ See Addenda for notes on these men.

leaders of socialism, Daniel De Leon, Eugene V. Debs, and Victor Berger. Needless to say, Parrington had planned a vindication of them born of his desire to see more justice in the world.

There were echoes of this proletarian strife manifested in the world of letters. Certain writers following Edward Bellamy joined the quest for a socialistic Utopia. Parrington had completed his passage on Bellamy, but of the party formed to agitate for principles advanced in *Looking Backward* and of the other writers of Utopian novels, such as Tourgee, he left no treatment. A second set of writers were grouped together by reason of their common concern over the darkening future of American civilization. Edwin Markham, his humanitarian sympathies aroused, penned an indictment of wage exploitation in his "The Man with the Hoe" that caused no little concern in its day and spurred defenders of the existing economic system to offer liberal prizes for an equally convincing reply. The emergence of naturalism, seen in Stephen Crane⁴ and Frank Norris,⁴ was also a response to the darkening social outlook. Parrington defined naturalism as "a pessimistic realism that sets man in a mechanical world." He traced this pessimistic determinism to the machine industrialism so overwhelming in its power as to impress man with his own impotence, to the centralization of wealth, which causes a caste regimentation of society, and finally to the great city, which reduces the inhabitant to an infinitesimal unit of a vast beehive. Other writers, equally oppressed by this state of affairs, concentrated on the phenomena of the city. It was here that Parrington intended to discuss Henry B. Fuller, Harold Frederic, Robert Grant, and Edith Wharton.⁵

The third party of revolt was a hesitant one—the South, still convalescing from the Civil War and further weakened by divisions in its counsels. Though burdened by parochial creeds, weakened by lack of intellectual leadership, the agrarian South, largely plebeian, joined the Middle Border in its uprising. The middle-class South, represented by Henry W. Grady, proposed a surrender to the Yankee principle of industrial exploitation, while the remnant of the old aristocracy resisted the new and clung to the traditions of the past. Thomas Nelson Page, Joel Chandler Harris, Mary Murfree, and George Washington Cable attended to these romantic traditions of the plantation, the negro, the mountaineer, and

⁴ See Addenda for lecture notes on these writers.

⁵ See Addenda for brief notes on these writers.

the creole; while Sidney Lanier⁵ became the poet of southern landscape and sunrise. Far more significant in Parrington's eye was the rebirth of a southern intelligentsia represented in letters by Ellen Glasgow, W. W. Woodward, the debunker, and James Branch Cabell,⁶ the ironic romanticist. Professor Parrington, who had been among the first to appreciate Cabell, admired the competence of his style and the effectiveness of his ironic commentary on American civilization.

Book Three was to present the movement of liberalism from 1903 to 1917, and the reaction to it following the war. Parrington called this period of liberalism the "great stock-taking venture." These liberals announced that the democratic hopes of earlier days had not been fulfilled, that the Constitution is not a democratic instrument nor was it intended to be, and that while Americans were professing to create a democracy, they had been creating in fact a plutocracy. They then determined upon a new program based on their discovery of the relations between economics and politics. Such relations made necessary the control of property by the collective will, and to that end they endeavored to squeeze the Hamiltonian state into a Jeffersonian mold.⁷

The muckrakers of 1903 to 1910 attacked the plutocracy where its joints creaked. In effect this group of writers from Henry D. Lloyd to Charles Edward Russell, Gustavus Meyers, and A. M. Simons popularized economics and made the liberals conscious of what was going on behind the closed doors of the directors' meetings. On the other hand, the movement of Progressivism, engaged in the hopeless task of directing the political machinery to democratic ends, was typified by Robert LaFollette, Theodore Roosevelt, and Woodrow Wilson. Only one, LaFollette, remained true to the colors; the other two compromised, then surrendered, and the hopes of liberalism went down in a tragic *débâcle*.

In the realm of letters this liberalism found expression in three major groups of writers. A set of intellectuals turned critical began to scrutinize the economic, political, and social institutions of America. Of these critics Parrington considered Randolph Bourne and Charles A. Beard⁸ the most important. Another set turned

⁵ See Addenda for brief notes on these writers.

⁶ See Addenda for magazine article on Cabell.

⁷ "A Chapter in American Liberalism," which is included in the Addenda, deals with this subject, with the muckraking movement, and with post-war realism.

⁸ See Addenda, "A Chapter in American Liberalism."

to fiction, shifting their point of view from liberalism to radicalism, from politics to economics. Winston Churchill⁹ had discovered the emptiness of the profit motive with its resultant destruction of beauty, freedom, and creative craftsmanship. Similarly Robert Herrick⁹ became a pathologist of the city, investigated its ethics, and then rebelled at the predatory egoism which ruled its life to the destruction of all ethical integrity. At his best Jack London¹⁰ wrote of the revolution, though later selling out to bigger and better royalties; while Upton Sinclair became the revolutionary sleuth spying upon the indecencies of the capitalist system. Perhaps these novelists were too seriously engaged in social criticism and reform propaganda to become great craftsmen, yet they were to Parrington important writers, because they were in touch with deep currents of American thought.

Still a third set of writers turned to a realistic technique appropriate to the times, yet avoided the weakness inherent in direct propaganda. The poets Masters,¹¹ Sandburg, Frost, and Robinson, Parrington chose for consideration as realists with an art, an underlying criticism of conditions, and a philosophy that set them above the other poets of the time. For the same reasons he had planned a section on Huneker. Theodore Dreiser,¹² because of his massive documentation, his deterministic philosophy, and his sense of the inevitable tragedy inherent in life, Parrington labeled a modern, meaning by this that Dreiser most adequately and most thoroughly represented modern America.

The last section of the book was to be a consideration of the post-war reaction to the liberalism of the preceding period. The economic democracy which liberals had marked for their goal was now attacked by the younger intellectuals. H. L. Mencken turned to farce and burlesque for methods adequate to express his contempt of American democracy. Biologists pointed to the inescapable laws of heredity as a refutation of the liberals' hopes for social improvement; while some psychologists, discovering morons, ruled out all equalitarian Utopias. Parrington could find little sympathy in his heart for a return to the spirit of aristocracy. This narrow, doctrinaire biology, denied by the more careful biologists and

⁹ See "The Problem Novel and the Diversion from Naturalism," in the Addenda.

¹⁰ See Addenda for notes on London.

¹¹ See Addenda, "Ole Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth*."

¹² See Addenda for lecture notes on Dreiser.

the behaviorists who assert that environment is determining, cannot rule out all environmental changes. As long as the *milieu* is an effective force in molding the organism, room is left for social betterment by social readjustments. A disputed psychology dealing in primitive sex drives, gland secretions, and intelligence scores is no more conclusive on the subject.

The attack on industrialism is nearer to the heart of Parrington's ideals, because it proved to him that liberalism is not by any means dead. Such a comprehensive movement enlisting first-class minds—intellectuals, poets, novelists, dramatists—revealed clearly to him the increasing criticism of a dehumanized economics, and such criticism proceeds from an implicit liberalism.

The attack on the middle class is seen best in Zona Gale,¹³ Evelyn Scott, and particularly in Sinclair Lewis,¹⁴ whom Parrington rated the chief of our younger satirists. This satire is a searching criticism of the *bourgeois* ideals and habitat, its tyrannical herd-mind, its poverty-stricken materialism. By its nature this satire clearly suggests a set of new ideals which grow out of a free individualism rather than a political or economic socialism. The emphasis is shifted by implication from externalities to things of the spirit. This is more clearly seen in the new philosophies just now arising, which deny the finality of economic law, turn in politics to the ideal of a decentralized state, and in science to new syntheses emphasizing the pragmatic and relative aspects of scientific law.

The latest literary fashions that Parrington intended to consider embody a psychological emphasis seen in the impressionism of biography, in the brutal but frank pacifism of war novels,¹³ and most significantly of all in the impressionism and expressionism of Sherwood Anderson.¹⁴ Parrington felt that there were rich potentialities latent in these new methods although the writers of the new school were themselves painfully at sea. In technique as well as in direct statement there was to be seen, though obscurely, a renewed emphasis upon individual integrity, the necessity for creative expression, and the reaffirmation of what some may choose to call spiritual values.

In effect he believed that all is not lost. Through the influence of science we are recovering the neglected realism of the past; we

¹³ See Addenda for brief notes.

¹⁴ See Addenda, "Sherwood Anderson: a Psychological Naturalist."

are not only reaffirming it but making its acquaintance more intimately than ever before. Weld that science to enlightened and humane aspirations (Parrington believed that there was nothing in the findings of science that prevented the union) and a revived liberalism will make the world a fit place to live in. It is by no means an easy program, for it requires knowledge of fact, and ability to carry knowledge into the sphere of effective action. It is made doubly difficult by the untimely death of one of its chief proponents, yet in the young men and women whom he liked to have around him there must be, however obscurely, a feeling and a groping for the way out. They will be guided and inspired by such utterance as Parrington's diagnosis of Sinclair Lewis, where he quarries out a vein of his own enduring liberalism.

"Some lingering faith in our poor human nature he still clings to. In the great American mass that human nature is certainly foolish and unlovely enough. It is too often blown up with flatulence, corroded with lust, on familiar terms with chicanery and lying; it openly delights in hocus pocus and discovers its miracle-workers in Comstocks and Aimee Semple McPhersons. But for all its pitiful flabbiness human nature is not wholly bad, nor is man so helpless a creature of circumstance as the cynics would have us believe. There are other and greater gods than Mumbo Jumbo worshiped in America, worthier things than hocus pocus; and in rare moments even Babbitt dimly perceives that the feet of his idol are clay. There are Martin Arrowsmiths as well as Elmer Ganttrys, and human nature, if it will, can pull itself out of the trap. Bad social machinery makes bad men. Put the banker in the scullery instead of the drawing-room; exalt the test-tube and deflate the cash register; rid society of the dictatorship of the middle class; and the artist and the scientist will erect in America a civilization that may become, what civilization was in earlier days, a thing to be respected. For all his modernity and disillusion learned from Pullman-car philosophers, Sinclair Lewis is still an echo of Jean Jacques and the golden hopes of the Enlightenment—thin and far-off, no doubt, but still an authentic echo."

"Thin and far-off, no doubt," is this contemporary liberalism, yet Parrington found hints of it in the midst of the war fiasco that culminated in reaction and despair. Death did not grant him the opportunity to show what he found, but the young men who learned from him the love of sound craftsmanship, who were inspired by

his enlightened dreams, will some day complete the monument. In the meantime Vernon Louis Parrington would like to be held in memory as he held his friend, J. Allen Smith—as a “scholar, teacher, democrat, gentleman.”

E. H. EBY

University of Washington
Seattle, Washington
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FOREWORD

WITH the present volume I bring to a close my studies in the main currents in American thought. The broad drifts of American opinion, as I interpret that opinion, should now be sufficiently clear. The volume immediately preceding the present one dealt with the romantic revolution in America—one of the most stimulating experiences the American mind has undergone—which was traced to twin forces: the influence upon an expansive generation of French romantic thought, and the spirit of robust individualism resulting from a fluid economics; and the creative result was the spontaneous emergence in America of a buoyant spirit of hopefulness that expressed itself in democratic programs and faith in a benevolent progress. The present volume deals with the slow decay of this romantic optimism in more thoughtful minds, and the cause of that decay is traced to three sources: the stratifying of economics under the pressure of centralization; the rise of a mechanistic science; and the emergence of a spirit of skepticism which, under the pressure of industrialism, the teachings of the physical sciences, and the lessons of European intellectuals, is resulting in the questioning of the ideal of democracy as it has been commonly held hitherto, and the spread of a spirit of pessimism. The custodianship of America by the middle class has brought unsuspected consequences in its train.

Thus after three hundred years' experience we have returned, intellectually, to the point from which we set out, and the old philosophy brought to the new world from the compact societies of Europe, with its doctrine of determinism and its mood of pessimism, has come back in changed form to color the thinking of our generation. Emersonian optimism, that was the fullest expression of the romantic faith, is giving way to Dreiserian pessimism, and the traditional doctrine of progress is being subjected to analysis by a growing skepticism. Our intellectual history thus conceived falls into three broad phases: Calvinistic pessimism, romantic optimism, and mechanistic pessimism. Between the first and the last lies the America of yesterday that shaped the American mind

and American institutions; and with the submergence of that native world we are in the way of repeating here the familiar history of Europe, with its coercive regimentations reproduced on a larger scale and in more mechanical fashion. Once more a gloomy philosophy stands on the threshold of the American mind. Whether it will enter and take possession of the household, no one can predict as yet. This much nevertheless is clear: an industrialized society is reshaping the psychology fashioned by an agrarian world; the passion for liberty is lessening and the individual, in the presence of creature comforts, is being dwarfed; the drift of centralization is shaping its inevitable tyrannies to bind us with. Whether the quick concern for human rights, that was the noble bequest of our fathers who had drunk of the waters of French romantic faith, will be carried over into the future, to unhorse the machine that now rides men and to leaven the sodden mass that is industrial America, is a question to which the gods as yet have given no answer. Yet it is not without hope that intelligent America is in revolt. The artist is in revolt, the intellectual is in revolt, the conscience of America is in revolt.

* * * * *

It ought not to be necessary to add that in these volumes I have not essayed to write a history of American literature—that rather difficult task for which no scholar is as yet equipped. But I have suffered so many gentle reproofs for failing to do what I did not set out to do, that it may be well to repeat what I said in the Foreword to Volume I, that I have been concerned in the present study with the total pattern of American thought—the broad drift of major ideas—and not with vagrant currents or casual variations. In particular I have been repeatedly taken to task for a seeming slight put upon certain of our artists, and it has been inferred that I slighted them because I chose to ignore whatever did not fit into a rigid scheme of economic determinism. Let me say in rebuttal that I hold no brief for a rigid scheme of economic determinism. I recognize the rich culture potentialities that inhere in individual variation from type, and I realize that the arts are likely to receive their noblest gifts from men who should be classed biologically as cultural sports or variations from the cultural type. But in such a study as I have undertaken, individual variation is significant not for its own sake, but rather for the help it may offer in deter-

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mining the type. After due consideration I see no cause to apologize for my treatment of Poe, for example, if indeed I have done so. I am content to have placed him historically and culturally in relation to the whole, leaving the fascinating problem of his variation from type to those who deal with such problems.

V. L. P.



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INTRODUCTION *

IN the second volume of my studies I laid down the thesis that at the beginning of our national existence two rival philosophies contended for supremacy in America: the humanitarian philosophy of the French Enlightenment, based on the conception of human perfectibility and postulating as its objective an equalitarian democracy in which the political state should function as the servant to the common well-being; and the English philosophy of *laissez faire*, based on the assumed universality of the acquisitive instinct and postulating a social order answering the needs of an abstract "economic man," in which the state should function in the interests of trade. And I pointed out further, with adequate backing up, I hope, that the first of these antagonistic philosophies was accepted by the agrarian leaders of America and found issue in the Jeffersonian program; that the second came to dominate the thinking of the mercantile, capitalistic America and took form in Hamiltonian Federalism. Unfortunately this logical alignment of diverse economic groups was obscured by the needs of practical politics, and in passing through the explosive Jacksonian revolution both philosophies underwent subtle changes. Jacksonianism imposed upon America the ideal of democracy to which all must thereafter do lip service, but it lost its realistic basis in a Physiocratic economics and wandered in a fog of political equalitarianism; and the Whiggery that issued from Federalism turned to the work of converting the democratic state into the servant of property interests. Both political parties contented themselves with an egoistic individualism that took no account of social ends, forgetful of the humanitarian spirit that underlay the earlier democratic program. The finer spirit of the Enlightenment was lost, and in consequence the major parties chose to follow the economic interests of master groups, heedless of all humanitarian issues.

* The Introduction, as will be readily seen by the reader, is not complete, yet it undoubtedly contains the gist of what Professor Parrington intended to include in it. He wrote several forms of some parts, from which the Introduction as it stands has been pieced together in logical order. It is probable that the last words he wrote were the significant closing words here—"to summon forth the potential intelligence of the younger generation."—*Publisher*.

But the spirit awakened by the earlier democratic enthusiasm could not be kept in political strait-jackets. The Jacksonian revolution overflowed all narrow party dikes, expressing itself in diverse humanitarian and reform movements and quickening the minds of ardent Americans with larger democratic aspirations. The noble idealism of successive third parties that have sprung up reasserted the democratic principles flouted by the major parties. The Locofoco movement, the Free-soil Party, the early Republican Party, the Greenback Party, the Populist Party, the Progressive Party, have had a common objective, namely to carry further the movement inaugurated by the Jeffersonians to make of America a land of democratic equality and opportunity—to make government in America serve man rather than property. The third-party movements have always been democratic movements, and though they have failed in their immediate objectives they have served the purpose of reminding the major parties—oftentimes rudely—that America presumes to be a democratic country. Thus interpreted the history of the political struggle in America since 1790 falls into three broad phases: the Jeffersonian movement that asserted the ideal of political democracy; the Jacksonian movement that established it crudely in practice; and the successive third-party movements that attempted to regain such ground as had been lost, to extend the field, and to perfect the machinery of democratic government.

As a result of the long struggle the abstract principle of democracy—during the period under consideration—was firmly established in the popular mind; but as it fell under the successive custodianship of different economic groups it came to receive strangely diverse interpretations. Interpreted by the coonskin Jacksonians it meant political equalitarianism; by the slave economy it meant a Greek democracy; by the industrial economy it meant the right of exploitation. It has changed service with each new master. Always the principles of Jeffersonianism—of democracy as a humane social order, serving the common well-being—have been lost out of the reckoning, and except in so far as the tendency has been checked by the third-party threat, democratic professions have been only a thin cover under which the old class warfare has gone forward vigorously. In the decades immediately following the Civil War democracy passed under the custodianship of the middle class, who were busily engaged in creating a plutoc-

racy, and the major ideas of the earlier movement took on a characteristic middle-class coloring. The idea of a beneficent progress, which was the flower of the doctrine of human perfectibility, came to be interpreted as material expansion with constantly augmenting profits; and the idea of democracy came to be interpreted as the right to use the government of the whole for the benefit of the few.

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Considered historically perhaps the chief contribution of the Progressive movement to the democratic cause is to be found in its discovery of the fundamentally undemocratic nature of the federal Constitution. That so obvious a fact so long escaped recognition was due to political causes easily understood. For a century the Constitution had been a symbol of national unity, a cohesive force amidst the drift of expansion, a counter influence to the disintegrations of states-rights particularisms; and as such it had appealed to the national loyalties of men in every commonwealth. To criticize it was reckoned disloyal. The long process of interpretation had remained in the hands of the lawyers and had been wholly legalistic and antiquarian. In all this earlier commentary—except for a small group of left-wing Abolitionists who repudiated the entire instrument—no question as to the democratic spirit of the Constitution was raised, no doubts as to its sufficiency as a fundamental democratic law were suggested. The class divisions that presided at its making were ignored, and the aristocratic spirit of its creators was forgotten. But with the rising revolt against the custodianship of government by financial and industrial interests came a new critical interest in the fundamental law. Discovering that its hands were tied the democracy began to question the reason for the bonds that constrained its movements. The latent distrust was quickened by what was regarded by many as judicial usurpations of power, such as the act of the Supreme Court in declaring unconstitutional the federal income-tax law, and the question of the desirability of an eighteenth-century document that by its complexity unduly impeded the functioning of the democratic will, was thrust into the foreground of political debate. It was the struggle of 1789 over again.

The new school of criticism was historical rather than legalistic. It was concerned primarily with origins—and it must take into account the political theories and class interests of the eighteenth-

century gentlemen who framed the document. It refused to look upon the Fathers as supermen, devoted unselfishly to high patriotic duty, but chose to regard them as capable statesmen, saturated with aristocratic prejudices, who fearful of losing control of the new venture in republicanism, took care to shape an instrument that threw sharp restrictions about the majority will.

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The theme of the present volume is the industrialization of America under the leadership of the middle class, and the consequent rise of a critical attitude towards the ideals and handiwork of that class. It concerns itself primarily with the spirit of realism that under the constrictions of industrialism and with the spread of scientific modes of thought emerged to question the ardent romanticisms of an earlier age, and bring under doubt the excellence of a social order created by the Industrial Revolution.

The field to be traversed is thus predetermined. The interpretation of our literature since 1860 must be fitted into the broad lines of our national experience and will follow the main divisions of development.

- I. The conquest of America by the middle class and its custodianship of democracy. The philosophy of the middle class.
 - II. The challenge of that overlordship by:
 1. The older democratic agrarianism as expressed chiefly in the third-party movements.
 2. The new proletarian philosophy that came likewise out of the ferment of the French Revolution, but that traveled a different course—through Europe and the earlier continental Industrial Revolution, and thence to America.
 - III. The intellectual revolution brought about by science with the results:
 1. The recovery of a spirit of realism.
 2. The appropriation of science by the middle class.
 - IV. The rise of a detached criticism by the younger intellectuals.
- In dealing with this material it will be necessary to follow sectional lines in the earlier decades until the encompassing movement of centralization finally obliterated them and produced a common national spirit and purpose.

In the welter that is present-day America militant philosophies

with their clear-cut programs and assured faiths are wanting, and many feel, as Matthew Arnold felt fourscore years ago, that they are dwelling between worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born. The old buoyant psychology is gone and in the breakdown and disintegration of the traditional individualism no new philosophies are rising. Builders of Utopias are out of a job. Political and economic theory is in charge of paymasters and is content with the drab rim of the familiar landscape. Retainer-fees have blotted out for it the lovelier horizons that earlier thinkers contemplated. Academic political scientists and economists have largely joined the Swiss guards, and abdicated the high prerogative of speculative thought. It is the men of letters—poets and essayists and novelists and dramatists, the eager young intellectuals of a drab generation—who embody the mind of present-day America; not the professional custodians of official views. They at least decline to block the path to the Promised Land with retainer-fees; they at least are free souls, and in the measure of their abilities, free thinkers. It is to them therefore that one must turn to discover the intellectual currents of later America—to their aspirations as well as to their criticisms. Literature at last has become the authentic voice of this great shapeless America that means so much to western civilization. Not theologians any longer, nor political philosophers, nor industrial masters, nor bankers, are the spokesmen of this vibrant life of a continent, but the intellectuals, the dreamers, the critics, the historians, the men of letters, in short; and to them one may turn hopefully for a revelation of American life.

The period dealt with in the present study marks the complete triumph of the middle class and the final defeat of the traditional agrarianism. The disintegration of the earlier romanticisms, both native and imported, has run its course. The philosophy of Jefferson and John Taylor, with its physiocratic bias, its antipathy to a money economy, its love of local autonomy, has been buried in the potter's field.

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Amidst all the turmoil and vague subconscious tendencies, certain ideas slowly clarified: first, that the earlier democratic aspirations had somehow failed, that an equalitarian philosophy adapted to frontier conditions could not easily be carried over into a centralizing and stratifying America and was doomed to eventual

defeat; second, that even in the supposed heyday of our democracy, we had never achieved a democracy, but rather a careless individualism that left society at the mercy of a rapacious middle class; third, that we must take our bearings afresh and set forth on a different path to the goal. As these convictions slowly rose into consciousness, a quick suspicion of our earlier philosophies arose to trouble us. With the growing realism of the times came a belief that our French romantic theories were mainly at fault and we must somehow go back to the rationalistic eighteenth century and start once more to recreate a democratic philosophy. The crux of the matter seemed to lie in the romantic conception of human nature. Rousseau and Godwin were the false prophets who led us astray, and we must return to the solid realism of John Locke. In the light of a realistic psychology, with its discovery of morons, and its study of mob tendencies, it was no longer possible to take seriously that attractive figment of the romantic imagination—man in the state of nature, perfectible by following the light of reason, seeking justice. Morons do not fit nicely into the older theory—they jar one's faith in human perfectibility. In the light of intelligence tests perhaps the whole romantic theory of democracy was only a will-o'-the-wisp. With the very foundations of our traditional philosophy turning to quicksand under our feet, no wonder we are bedeviled by doubts and uncertainties. Utopias no longer seem so near at hand as they did; plans and specifications of the ideal commonwealth no longer seem simple matters to be drawn by any competent social carpenter. Our jauntiness is gone, speculation is less important than investigation, and in the spirit of sober realism we are setting about the serious business of thinking.

In this thinking two major forces are at hand: economics and psychology. In our economic realism we are returning to the spirit of the eighteenth century, and adapting the determinism that marked political thought from Harrington and John Adams to Webster and Calhoun; but we are equipped with a psychological knowledge that those earlier thinkers lacked. Wedding the new psychology to the older economic determinism, we may hope in a spirit of sober realism to make some progress in our thinking.

Yet not too hastily should we abandon our earlier faith: the eighteenth-century conception of environment as a creative influence in determining character is a vital idea not yet adequately explored. Even morons may be traced back to adenoids or diets

of salt pork and whisky or to later machine labor, and aristocracies are still seen to be economic. And aristocratic albinos may well breed mobs and morons. Jefferson was not as foolish as many of his disciples have been, and Jeffersonian democracy still offers hope. Education begins to fail—except education to individualize and to summon forth the potential intelligence of the younger generation.



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INTRODUCTION TO THE TRANSACTION EDITION
VERNON LOUIS PARRINGTON

Bruce Brown

“Ideas are not godlings that spring perfect-winged from the head of Jove; they are not flowers that bloom in a walled garden; they are weapons hammered out on the anvil of human needs.”

—*Vernon Louis Parrington*

THE FIELD AT THE FAIRGROUNDS in Guthrie, the capital of the Oklahoma Territory, was frozen but free of snow for the kickoff of the big college football game on New Year’s Eve 1897. The contest, which was actually the prelude to the day’s main event, the Territorial Intercollegiate Oratorical Contest, pitted the University of Oklahoma against another Oklahoma school, Kingfisher College.

It was the fledgling University of Oklahoma football team’s first game that far from home, and during the early part of the contest they had some tough sledding. Oklahoma end Bill McCutcheon was being punished particularly hard by a heavy-set Kingfisher tackle. “He hurt me every time he hit me,” McCutcheon recalled later. Closer inspection revealed that McCutcheon’s opponent was wearing armor: Beneath his jersey he had concealed an elbow of stovepipe over each shoulder and arm.

Although McCutcheon’s opponent was forced to shed his extra gear, Kingfisher continued to dominate Oklahoma, and carried an 8-6 lead to the bench at halftime. There is no record of what the Oklahoma coach told his beleaguered team as they warmed themselves during the break, but its results were evident during the second half in classic college football fashion. The Oklahoma offense came alive, eating up the field with plays that called for the tackles and ends to cross-block their opposite numbers while the ball carrier swung through the gap

boosted by supporting backs, for in those days, football offenses relied as much on pushing from behind as blocking in front.

Midway through the second half, the game was interrupted by the Logan County sheriff, who had never seen a football game before, and supposed the action on the gridiron to be a brawl in progress. It took the appeals of several notables present, including University of Oklahoma President David Ross Boyd (Oklahoma was by then leading), before the sheriff would let the game be completed. Finally relenting, he gave the affair a Wild West touch by firing his gun over his head to restart the contest, prompting the spectators to respond with the appropriate rodeo cries: "Hold that steer!" "Ride 'em cowboy!" "E-yip-eeeeeeee!"

Out on the playing field, the flavor was not so much Red River as Crimson Wave. Although Oklahoma's young Harvard-educated football coach had chosen not to play in this game himself, the Sooners still bore the strong mark of Harvard football, that rough rugby/soccer amalgam which won first the Ivy League colleges and ultimately all of America away from traditional soccer. Striding the sidelines in a tweed suit and tie, the Oklahoma coach exhorted his men. They were an odd crew, composed of a professional baseball player, a Chickasaw Indian, some local farmers and a smattering of University of Oklahoma students, but now the drilling he had put them through paid off and they won handily by the score of 17 to 8.

This was the first of many hurrahs for both University of Oklahoma football and its tweedy coach and English professor, Vernon Louis Parrington. During the four years he coached the Sooners, Parrington, then a darkly handsome young man in the Robert Louis Stevenson mold, only lost twice, and one of those games turned on what was later revealed to be an illegal drop kick by the University of Arkansas Razorbacks, according to Harold Keith's *Oklahoma Kickoff*. After shutting out the last four opponents Oklahoma faced at the close of the 1900 season, Parrington retired forever from football coaching with what is at this writing still the second highest winning percentage in the history of Sooner football after Bud Wilkinson.

Parrington's explanation for the move was that he wanted to devote more energy to the teaching of English, but his motives, like everything else about him, were far from simple. A voracious reader who actually hated Harvard and the old Brahmin-dominated culture it represented, Parrington also wanted more time for personal questing. As William Allen White recalled in his Pulitzer Prize winning autobiography, Par-

rington was part of a crowd of young fellows “too proud for pool, too wicked for prayer meetings, too lazy for baseball—although Vernon Parrington pitched a mean outcurve for the Emporia Browns—too sophisticated for the local poker game, and too young and full of vision to let the world go by without trying to understand it.”

Parrington’s real passion of the moment was poetry, which he wrote and published in the local newspapers. He also spent several years in intense Bible study while at Oklahoma, as a recent article by Lark Hall in the *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* shows. In time, the wide ranging intellectual curiosity that was a life-long characteristic carried him from Victorian poets to the arts and architecture to English and American literature to political science and the history of ideas, and finally landed him on shores far removed from the close-drawn world of his early Presbyterian schooling.

Although the glory he achieved on the gridiron and the diamond would be considered crowning achievements for many fondly remembering their careers, they are for Parrington a mere footnote compared to his later accomplishments in the arena of intellectual history. Long recognized as one of the brilliant teachers of his generation, Vernon Louis Parrington reached the apex of his career in 1928 when the first two volumes of his epic study of the development of American culture, *Main Currents in American Thought*, were awarded the Pulitzer Prize for history.

He was felled by a heart attack the next year, but his influence continued to grow posthumously. By 1940, even Lionel Trilling, who was highly critical of Parrington, acknowledged that “his book now stands at the center of our thought about America.” Parrington’s reputation has fallen so drastically during the intervening decades, however, that younger students of American literature may be surprised to learn that his writings were once thought of comparable importance to those of Oswald Spengler, Alfred North Whitehead, and Vladimir Lenin.

The same cycle of style that made Parrington seem so hopelessly old-fashioned a few years ago may now be bringing him back, though, for our own time bears more than a passing resemblance in terms of the interests and the excesses of the high 1920s, an era which both produced Parrington his greatest work and gave him his first global acclaim.

VERNON LOUIS PARRINGTON was six years old in the spring of 1877 when his father decided to give up the law and office work for farming. A restless idealist of a sort more common to the previous century

than our own, John Parrington had already been a high school principal, commanded black troops in battle as a captain in the Union Army, been elected to county office, herded sheep, and practiced law.

Now he concluded that physical and mental health demanded an agrarian life, and so he moved the family from Aurora, Illinois, to the town of Americus, Kansas, and then on to the 160 acre homestead he proved up outside town. The farm's improvements amounted to a 50-foot well which "yielded an abundance of slippery-tasting, alkaline water," as Vernon later recalled, a four room house (with blue clay from the well in the walls for insulation), and a rude stable. The land itself was almost perfectly flat with only one wild tree, a broken-crowned cottonwood that stood a half mile from the house.

In an unpublished autobiographical reminiscence he wrote for members of his family in 1918, Parrington said Hamlin Garland's classic agrarian novel, *Son of the Middle Border*, accurately pictured every "detail of ugliness and discomfort" of the years he spent on the farm outside Americus, but added that for him the life was not an entirely drab or hopeless existence. "It was filled with poignant emotions," he recalled. "To go to bed with ... the wild fascination of a prairie fire in the soft darkness of a spring night ... and then wake in the morning to the call of the prairie cock from a low ridge half a mile away—a call that was compact of the dawns and freedoms of the untamed places—was that not to sleep and wake in the very Land of Desire?"

Although he left the farm for good by the time he was twenty, Parrington credited it with making a lasting contribution to his intellectual makeup. "[F]rom the vantage point of our farm, two and one half miles north of the village, I saw the border move beyond us and the countryside change from a wild, unploughed prairie, to a well-tilled farming region. Of the diverse experiences of my life I value none more than this. In the most receptive years of my life I came under the influence of ... the frontier with its democratic sympathies and democratic economies. From that influence I have never been able to escape, nor have I wished to escape. To it and the spirit of agrarian revolt I grew out of, I owe much of my understanding of American history and much of my political philosophy."

When the Parringtons moved again in 1877 to Emporia, the largest town in the vicinity, with a population of about 8,000, it was partly to enable John Parrington to better carry out his new duties as probate judge, and partly to give the Parrington boys a chance for a better

education than was available at the one-room school house at Pumpkin Ridge. Both Vernon and his brother John were promptly enrolled in Emporia College, a small Presbyterian academy which Parrington described as "provincial—quite wholesomely I now think." Although academically minimal in many respects, Emporia College did Vernon the great service of introducing him to two ideals that were to play important parts in his life: the curveball and art.

"I was fifteen when I first saw an out-curve thrown," Parrington wrote in February 1918 when he was forty-seven years old. "Time, place, circumstance, the way the great Pack twisted the ball in his palm and delivered it with a full arm sweep, the lucid explanation of the theory—these things are still fresh in my memory ... for these are among the golden experiences of youth. In that moment new fields, fresh interests were opened to me, and thereafter I was assiduous in practice until I could throw a curve that the most skeptical must acknowledge." More than that, he quickly developed into one of Kansas' better players, touring the area at age nineteen as part of an all-star battery that local baseball teams hired to come in for important games.

Meanwhile, other interests were already competing for his time, particularly painting, which he studied for several years at Emporia. "When I was 16 I had definitely determined to be a painter," he wrote. "By the time I was 18 ... an increasing realization of economic demands had driven this idea out of my mind; but not before some realization of the significance of art in the life of men had come to me—a realization which later was to make such writers as William Morris my intellectual masters. The love of beauty rather than the love of truth was to dominate me and turn me aside from the stream of scientific learning which bore away so many of my generation."

By the time he graduated from Emporia with a bachelor of arts degree in 1891, Parrington had begun to cut a swath outside Emporia and Kansas. An essay of his, "History and God," was published in *College Life* magazine, and that fall he went away to Harvard on a full academic scholarship. Although he graduated two years later with Oswald Garrison Villard and William Vaughn Moody in the class of '93, Parrington largely loathed his time in Cambridge. "I was too inexperienced to know the ropes," he wrote, "and I got an appalling percentage of shiftless and stupid instructors."

While in Emporia, Parrington had begun a habit of heavy reading in the public library with an emphasis on Victorian novelists such as

Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot, Trollope, and Reade. At Harvard, he continued the practice on a broader scale. Like Hamlin Garland, who “took his degree” in the Boston Public Library, Parrington made self-directed study a major part of his education. Later, he would observe with an ironic glimmer that it was the “library and not the college that opened my mind to English literature, preparing me for the work I was to take up.”

Parrington had never consciously decided to be a teacher, but upon his graduation from Harvard he was offered a position as an English instructor back at Emporia College, and he accepted. He also played baseball professionally during the summers, pitching, catching and managing for the Emporia Browns in the Kansas League. He seemed to have considered professional baseball as a career (despite the poor pay and low social status the game enjoyed during those days), but the heat of the summer, the six game a week schedule, and the responsibility for keeping his players out of the bars finally took the bloom off the sport for him. Then, too, he was discovering at Emporia College that his gift for teaching might be greater than his one with the small white sphere.

The four years he spent at Emporia as an instructor were probably the busiest of his life, combining teaching English and French, earning his masters degree, playing baseball, courting an occasional young lady, handling a raft of his students’ extra-curricular activities, and seeing friends like William Allen White, the editor of the *Emporia Gazette* and author of the influential essay, “What’s the Matter with Kansas?” which helped swing the tide against populist William Jennings Bryan and elect Republican William McKinley president in 1896. Parrington himself was headed in the opposite direction politically. He voted for Bryan in 1896 (his first break with the staunch Republicanism of his father), and was soon borne farther to the left by the general distress that afflicted American agriculture during this period, and specifically by the decline in the Parrington family fortunes.

John Parrington had lost his judgeship some years before, and by 1897, after a decade of low corn prices and unrealized schemes, he was about to lose the only thing he and Vernon’s mother had left—the farm. In his family reminiscence, Parrington recalled warming himself by the stove on his parents farm during the winter of 1897 and listening as full big ears of corn burned “briskly, popping and crackling in the jolliest fashion. And if while we sat around such a fire watching the year’s crop go up the chimney, the talk sometimes became bitter

about railroads and middlemen, who will wonder? We were in a fitting mood to respond to Mary Ellen Lease and her doctrine of raising less corn and more hell.”

Assuming financial responsibility, Vernon asked Emporia College for a raise to save the family farm from foreclosure. The president would not grant it, but a short time later Vernon obtained the needed money by taking a job teaching English at the University of Oklahoma in Norman. Despite the good times he was to find in Norman, the experience was in some ways an ordeal, as is immediately apparent from Parrington’s description of his introduction to the town and campus. “A searing wind blew great dust clouds from the southwest as I stepped off the train and started for the University. I passed through a stretch of burnt-up, slovenly village, and out along a quarter mile of plank walk—the very nails of which were partly drawn out by the heat—and at last came to the University grounds, a small patch of brown prairie with a single red brick building topped off with a wartlike cupola.”

Parrington’s response was to throw himself into his labors, both academic and otherwise. “He would lay out for himself a given amount of work, and he was unhappy if he didn’t get it all done,” recalled his wife, the former Julia Williams, whom he married in 1901 when he was a professor at Oklahoma. “After his coaching and teaching came his evenings of work on his chief love, the writing of poetry. Always his great desire was to have more time to write. He felt that the true fullness of life came only through the imagination. Facts were dead lumber to him and he must reconstruct in his own imagination.” By his own estimation, he was then “still the bookman, drawing my nourishment from *belle lettres*.”

Although certainly not a pedant, he was nonetheless undistinguished in his thinking, and might have remained so had not great good fortune come to him in the form of personal disaster. The bad news was that in 1908 Parrington was fired from his position at the University of Oklahoma, which had by then come to include responsibility for directing the English and Athletic departments as well as teaching. Although in no way personal (Parrington was one of 23 people refused new contracts, including the president of the university, in the political turmoil that accompanied Oklahoma’s statehood), the loss of his livelihood was nonetheless distressing on a number of scores, among them the fact that it meant that he would have to give up the new house he had just designed and had built in Emporia.

The good news came a few weeks later when University of Washington President Thomas Kane made a special trip to Emporia on the recommendation of outgoing Oklahoma President Boyd to talk with Vernon Louis Parrington. Kane offered him a job before he got on the train out of town that night, and Parrington followed Kane to Seattle almost immediately. The verdant forests, island-strewn expanses of water, and volcanic peaks of the Pacific Northwest were as refreshing to him as the burnt prairie of Norman was oppressive. He already had friends and relatives in Seattle (he and Julia had been married there), and soon added more from the faculty of the University of Washington, among them Edward McMahan, William Savery, Frederic Morgan Padelford, and most important of all from an intellectual standpoint, J. Allen Smith, whose seminal Progressive history, *The Spirit of American Government*, had appeared the year before.

Although Smith was eleven years Parrington's senior and a member of the History rather than the English department, the two were remarkably similar in background and interests. Both had grown up in the Midwest, attended college, taught, and been fired by institutions of higher learning there. Both shared a fondness for Herbert Spencer and William Morris, and a perhaps not unconnected belief in Progressive ideals. The two became close friends, freely sharing their intellectual impulses, and in the process, the older man helped crystallize the younger man's thinking in several areas, among them the use of economics as a tool for cultural analysis. "When I quitted Norman the economic interpretation of history had not yet risen for me," Parrington wrote, "but it lay just below the horizon and was soon to become the chief luminary in my intellectual sky."

One obvious manifestation of Vernon Louis Parrington's deepening command of English and American literature was the tremendous popularity his classes attained. Still fit and handsome, with a full head of dramatically white hair, he had a powerful classroom presence that kindled a spark that still burns in his surviving students. "He was the best classroom teacher I ever saw or heard," declared Gladys Savage, eighty-two, a former student who later taught English herself at U.C.L.A. By the early 1920s, a course with Parrington became the *sine qua non* of liberal education at the University of Washington.

E. H. Eby, a former student and colleague of Parrington's at the University of Washington, reflected that "the source of that popularity was the personality of the teacher, together with his gift for presenting

ideas and provoking a response. By means of a Socratic cross-examination, Parrington made the student discover his intellectual deficiencies; while the class, to its astonishment and delight, found the quest for truth both elusive and exciting.”

All during this time Parrington was also quietly working on a book. As far back as his Oklahoma days, Parrington had been thinking about a study of American literature. Finally in 1913, five years after he came to Washington, he began to write *The Democratic Spirit in American Letters, 1620-1870*. The book was finished in 1918, but lack of interest by publishers forced him to put it on the shelf. Returning to it during the 1920s, Parrington continued to expand, strengthen, and polish it, until finally in 1927, seventeen years after he began it, the book appeared as *Main Currents in American Thought, vol. I and II*.

NINETEEN TWENTY-EIGHT was a vintage year for Pulitzer Prize recipients. The drama award that year went to Eugene O’Neill’s *Strange Interlude*, while the novel award was won by Thornton Wilder’s *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, and the poetry award was claimed by Edward Arlington Robinson’s *Tristram*.

However, for sheer originality and force of imagination—to say nothing of depth of study—none of these works could compare with that year’s winner of the Pulitzer for history, Vernon Louis Parrington’s *Main Currents in American Thought*.

Parrington’s opus was not only the first comprehensive history of American letters and thought to appear in this country, it was the first major work to consider American literature as an expression of American culture, rather than some academic aesthetic schema. We now take both of these perceptions so much for granted that it is easy to forget the bedrock contribution Parrington made to both literary criticism and intellectual history in America.

Working alone in Seattle, Parrington realized that much of American literature was crude by refined critical standards. Furthermore, if the reader was restricted to those dainty morsels fit for the period’s contemporary aesthetics, most of the best American writing would be thrown out. Parrington therefore seized on the idea of treating American literature and letters as an expression of the central American cultural value, democracy.

“And indeed in this country, with its long history of democratic aspiration, why should there not be a grand history of thought and letters celebrating the democratic theme?” Richard Hofstadter wrote of Parrington

in *The Progressive Historians*. “Why should not someone, at last, use the history of letters to illuminate national life and thought, and discuss literature, in the tradition of Sainte-Beuve and Taine, as an index of culture?”

There had previously been a couple of minor efforts at American literary history by writers like Barrett Wendell, but none had come close to the breadth of Parrington’s study, nor exhibited the felicitous quality of his prose. Similarly, a few efforts at American intellectual history had been attempted by writers like Moses Coit Tyler, but the subject had been almost entirely ignored by conventional academic historians, giving the old Sooner footballer an open field.

In Parrington’s hands, American literature, which had been a ragtag poor relative of the literatures of England and the Continent, was suddenly transformed, almost before the reader’s eyes, into a noble creature worthy of all the world’s attention, since it embodied so compellingly one of history’s great social experiments. While it is not entirely true that Parrington created the study of American literature in the nation’s colleges, it is fair to say that he did more than any other critic to hasten its initial acceptance, and thus paved the way, with the subsequent contribution of the great American novelists and critics of the 1930s and 1940s, for the unquestioned acceptance it enjoys today.

In developing the concept for what would become *Main Currents*, Parrington drew on intellectual sources as diverse as his rich fare of study. From Hippolyte Taine’s *History of English Literature*, which made a big impression on him during his college days, he absorbed three important lessons: the idea of using literature as a means of portraying national culture; the idea of organizing a grand literary history around a series of biographical and critical portraits; and lastly, the idea that environment plays at least some role in forming the art of a given era or nation. From William Morris and John Ruskin, Parrington picked up elements of the Victorian tradition of moral-aesthetic criticism, as well as something of their refined 19th century style. Thomas Jefferson gave him the marrow of democracy, while George Santayana provided germinal phrases like “winds of doctrine,” and J. Allen Smith, the pioneering Progressive historian, impressed upon him the importance of economics as a cultural determinant, and fostered his reading of Karl Marx.

Out of this and much more, Parrington wove a clear and consistent picture of the development of democracy in America during the 300 years between 1620 and approximately the beginning of the twentieth

century. He saw in this nation's literature the record of the tremendous struggle between the forces of majority and minority rule that spanned generations and even centuries to link writers as diverse as John Winthrop, J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, Theodore Parker, and Theodore Dresser in a grand and continuing debate about the very nature of America. For Parrington, the crux of this debate was embodied in the clash between Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton, the former representing the best of America's indigenous agrarian democratic tradition, and the later representing the rising power of the business oligarchy issuing from the marriage of the unearned increment to the centralized state.

Journalists, essayists, historians, propagandists, and satirists were all given consideration in *Main Currents*, along with the more traditionally literary writers such as novelists and poets. Parrington was primarily interested in tracing the development of "certain germinal ideas that have come to be reckoned traditionally American," but this did not deaden him to aesthetic concerns when they were warranted. He was one of the first influential twentieth century critics to champion both Walt Whitman and Herman Melville, and his own writing immediately reveals a distinctive aesthetic sense. Parrington was a master of the apt quote, the illuminating image, and the epigrammatic expression.

As a mature critic, Parrington demanded only one thing: that art have some bearing on the real world that produced it. He no longer had any patience with the idea of beauty for beauty's sake, and little more for the belle lettristic critics. "Do they understand the origin and significance of those ideas which they study so lovingly?" he asked in a 1917 essay, "Economics and Criticism."

Ideas are not godlings that spring perfect-winged from the head of Jove; they are not flowers that bloom in a walled garden; they are weapons hammered out on the anvil of human needs. Freedom to think is bought with a price; and to ignore the price is to lose all sense of values. To love ideas is excellent, but to understand how ideas themselves are conditioned by social forces, is better still. To desire culture, to enjoy commerce with the best that has been known and thought in the world is excellent also; but to understand the dynamics which lies back of all culture signifies more. Men who will be free, struggle to be free, fashion themselves ideas for swords to fight with. To consider the sword apart from the struggle is to turn dilettante and a frequenter of museums.

Regarding his partisanship on the larger social and political issues, Parrington was equally straightforward, writing in the foreword to volume I of *Main Currents*, “the point of view from which I have endeavored to evaluate the materials, is liberal rather than conservative, Jeffersonian rather than Federalist ...” This bias provided the values which lay behind Parrington’s judgments, but did not prevent him from memorably portraying figures he did not particularly admire. Regarding Hamilton, for instance, Parrington conveys the considerable magnitude of the first Treasury Secretary’s genius (“Certainly no other man in America saw so clearly the significance of the change that was taking place in English industrialism, and what tremendous reservoir of wealth the new order laid open to the country that tapped them”), as well as what might be called the moral blindness that led him to advocate child factory labor and the rule of the wealthy.

A self-taught architect who loved the balance and proportion of Gothic cathedrals, Parrington strove to impart a similar balance to his recounting the great American debate concerning democracy, as is evident in his pointed pairings of opposing views on essential questions. Thus Fisher Ames (“The essence and almost quintessence of good government is to protect property and its rights”) is set against James Fenimore Cooper (“A government founded on the representation of property ... is radically vicious. It is the business of government to resist the corruption of money, not to depend on them”), John Dickinson is set against John Adams, Robert Treat Paine against Horace Greeley, and so forth. Parrington was the rarest of all partisans in that his biases were honed, not in the darkness, but rather against the brightest intellects that divergent thought could provide.

Main Currents bears the mark of Parrington’s intellectual openness throughout. He was more than willing to follow the logic of situations and history wherever they might lead, even when they ran counter to his deepest assumptions and conditioning. It was Vernon Louis Parrington, the son of a Union Army officer and an abolitionist, who kindled in twentieth century America an appreciation of Southern writers like John Pendleton Kennedy (author of *Swallow Barn*), and who traced the history of a regional literature that has continued to grow in stature and importance since his death with the work of William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, Alice Walker, and many others. Similarly, Parrington, who devoted the final twenty years of his life to celebrating the theme of

democracy in America, was all too aware of the problems at the heart of American democracy.

From his own youth, Parrington knew that the spirit of American democracy was rooted in the freedom of the frontier, but also realized from first-hand experience that the frontier ethos carried within it the seed of its own destruction. "In the presence of vast, unpreempted resources, the right of every man to preempt and exploit what he would [became] synonymous with individual liberty," he wrote, "and if the small man were free to enjoy his petty privilege, the greater interests might preempt unchallenged . . . Where the policy of preemption has run its course, the function of government is seduced from its social purpose to perpetuate the inequalities which spring from the progressive monopolization of natural resources, with the augmenting corruption and injustice."

Parrington's sudden death in 1929 at the age of fifty-eight, while seemingly in the peak of health and at the height of his powers, prevented him from finishing volume III of *Main Currents*, but from what he left of the last volume, it is clear he believed the hour was late for the America he loved. "In the welter that is present day America," Parrington wrote in a passage which has a distinctly contemporary ring, "militant philosophies with their clear-cut programs and assured faiths are wanting. The old buoyant psychology is gone and in the breakdown and disintegration of the traditional individualism no new philosophies are rising. Builders of Utopias are out of a job. Political and economic theory is in the charge of the paymasters and is content with the drab rim of the familiar landscape."

Vernon Louis Parrington never lost the agrarian faith of his youth, nor the hope of Jeffersonian democracy it entailed. A realist to the end, however, he clearly saw the fate of that aspect of the American tradition, and described it in characteristically memorable fashion. "The philosophy of Jefferson and John Taylor," he wrote in the introduction to volume III, "with its physiocratic bias, its antipathy to a money economy, its love of local autonomy, has been buried in the potter's field."

Although he died before the Great Depression, the election of Franklin Roosevelt, and the New Deal, he could see that liberalism must embrace the centralized state, but that the risk in such an enterprise was great. Writing to a friend, Parrington succinctly described the dilemma that subsequently has eaten America alive: "We must have a political state strong enough to deal with corporate wealth, but how

are we going to keep the state with its augmenting power from being captured by the force we want to control?”

THE INITIAL CRITICAL reaction to *Main Currents in American Thought* was overwhelmingly positive. Henry Steele Commager called it “the finest piece of creative criticism in our literature,” while the *Saturday Review* found it as “accurate as sound scholarship should be,” and Howard Mumford Jones noted how it compelled “all other histories of literature . . . to pale their fires . . . Here was a useable past, adult, reasonable, coherent.”

During the 1930s, *Main Currents* became one of those rare popular books that galvanizes minds and changes lives. My mother recalls how the many volumes at the Library of Congress were continually worn out and replaced, and in Malcolm Cowley and Bernard Smith’s *Books That Changed Our Minds* (1938), Parrington ranked roughly on par with such seminal authors as Spengler, Whitehead, Lenin, and I. A. Richards in terms of frequency of mention by those nominating books for inclusion.

In fact, the only serious initial critical reservations about *Main Currents* arose, not from its specific treatment of American literature and letters, but from the originality of its conception, especially to the field of history. “There was so little regard for this kind of history, as history,” noted Hofstadter, “that *Main Currents*, even though it received the Pulitzer Prize in the field, was not at first taken by most historians as a historical work . . .”

By 1940, however, critical assessment of *Main Currents* had begun to shift, partly because of the new material that continuing historical and literary research had brought to light, and partly because certain original aspects of Parrington’s analysis challenged academic convention. Perry Miller at Harvard was one of several New England scholars who questioned Parrington’s interpretation of Roger Williams, and Clifford K. Shipton contested Parrington’s treatment of the Mathers.

More damaging to Parrington’s overall reputation was the emergence of a new group of literary critics who were primarily interested in detailed textual analysis and wished to avoid the contamination of literature with base concerns such as politics—in short, a group of critics in the very belletristic tradition that Parrington had stung so bitterly. Lionel Trilling led the charge of the “New Critics” against Parrington with a scathing reassessment of *Main Currents* that originally appeared in the *Partisan Review* in 1940, and was later collected in *The Liberal Imagination*.

Parrington was not a great mind; he was not a precise thinker or, except when measured by the low eminences that were about him, an impressive one. ... Separate Parrington from his informing idea of the economic and social determination of thought and what is left is a simple intelligence, notable for its generosity and enthusiasm but certainly not for its accuracy or originality. Take him even with his idea and he is, once its direction has been established, rather too predictable to be continuously interesting. It does not occur to Parrington that there is any other relation possible between the artist and reality than this passage of reality through the transparent artist; he meets evidence of imagination and creativeness with a settled hostility the expression of which suggests that he regards them as the natural enemies of democracy.

Trilling even suggested that some of Parrington's alleged critical gaucheries were due to what Trilling imagined to be sexual repression, while in *The Anatomy of Nonsense* (1942), Yvor Winters accused Parrington of "brutally crude thinking" and "vulgar floridity," pronouncing *Main Currents* "obsolete before it was written." Of all the critics who turned against Parrington during the 1940s, Alfred Kazin was among the more tempered in his judgement. In *On American Grounds* (1942), recently reissued in a 40th anniversary edition, Kazin faulted Parrington's "simplicity of judgment" which led him to see "his own image in the rebels of every generation," as well as "the indifference to literary values which his book displayed" in the treatment of literature. And yet Kazin also recognized that Parrington himself was an excellent writer and perhaps the outstanding Progressive intellectual.

Some of the criticisms of Parrington's *Main Currents in American Thought* were certainly warranted, for he could in fact be prolix and repetitive, and in his effort to single-handedly span the width and breadth of American letters, he sometimes spread himself thin. It is hardly fair to blame Parrington for developments that have occurred since, but one can not help wish he had been acquainted with certain writers available during his own time. For instance, Lewis Henry Morgan, who in 1851 first outlined the Native American contribution to the concept of democracy made by the Great Law of the Iroquois, could have greatly enriched Parrington's concept of democracy, and perhaps made him see America as something more than a seedbed for the flowers and weeds of Europe to multiply. On at least a few of the nearly 1,500 pages of *Main Currents* it is clear that Parrington did not really have a complete grasp of the beast he was wrestling.

Yet as critic Roger Sale observed in 1976, "it is a vastly better work than its subsequent detractors have tried to realize, one that people

who share none of Parrington's bias can read with admiration and pleasure." One reflection of this, perhaps, has been the steady sales *Main Currents* has enjoyed over the years. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich has had the book in continuous print for fifty-eight years with total sales through 1985 of 380,000 copies in combined hardcover and paperback editions. Moreover, it has continued to sell: According to Harcourt, nearly 70,000 copies of the paperback editions have been sold in the fifteen years since 1970.

And so, Vernon Louis Parrington remains a great Ozymandian figure of American literature and letters, nearly buried and forgotten in the drifting sands of aesthetic fashion, but still in touch with the American bedrock of which he was also a part. His visage has been defaced by vandals as well as those wishing to build monuments to other causes, but what remains today is still powerful enough to impress the unsuspecting sojourner with the wonder of a great heart and mind, and the America that made them.

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* This is given in full, as Professor Parrington left it, with those parts not completed by him in brackets. Some revision has been made for the parts he completed, but notes have been added to the text to show his original intention. For some of the bracketed headings after Part II of Book II some material is given in the Addenda from other work of Parrington's.—*Publisher*.

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