

The American Mind

MAIN CURRENTS IN AMERICAN THOUGHT. The Colonial Mind; The Romantic Revolution in America. Vols. 1 and 2. By VERNON LOUIS PARRINGTON. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1927. \$4 a volume.

Reviewed by HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

THIS is a work of the first importance, lucid, comprehensive, accurate as sound scholarship should be, and also challenging, original in its thinking, shrewd, and sometimes brilliant. A subject that could be made good for scholars only, that might be wound in technicalities or lost in tiresome description of tedious mediocrities has been made vividly alive. For however vividly Mr. Parrington ranges whatever puritans, demagogues, mystics, freaks, geniuses, reactionaries, come under his pen—his study is always of the critical moments of conflict where Tory and Liberal clash in the making of a democracy. His book is not a history of literature, although much important American literature, particularly the important American literature that was not *belles lettres*, is levied upon; it is not a history of events, which in these volumes constitute an environment pressing upon the mind; it is a genuine history of ideas, clearly seen, tirelessly followed, admirably analyzed. Indeed it is the book which historians and critics of American literature have been waiting and hoping for.

American histories of literature have so far been written in a kind of intellectual vacuum, where the subject was artificially abstracted from the elements of its environment. Emerson, Hawthorne, Melville have been studied esthetically, with an eye to their parallels, analogues, sources in Europe, and their conventional relationship to possible causes in America. They have been studied as *belles lettres* or philosophers, but not as Americans. The few comprehensive treatises in which the American writer was shown in relation to the active life about him, have been confused or unnaturally simplified. The authors of these studies have known literature, or they have known history, or, more rarely, they have known politics or philosophy, but to put all together and refine the issue has exceeded their powers. Hence our ignorance—no other term is admissible—of the real values in American writing, the undue praise, the undue blame which is characteristic of every critical estimate. Hence the absurd spectacle of certain American universities offering courses in obscure and mediocre authors because they wrote in Kansas or Connecticut, and it is patriotic to teach them, while other, better balanced but equally unilluminated institutions, neglect the great Americans altogether for minor Europeans more readily (to the Federalist or brahmin mind) understood or taught.

What was needed was not a new history of American literature, at least not first of all, but a social history of American backgrounds, an intellectual history of American thinking and American intellectual emotion, and if Mr. Parrington has not given us the first, he has studied it himself. The second he has achieved, and no reader seriously interested in American life as a development, as a possibility, and as an effect of inescapable causes, will fail to read him. There is a shelf full of conventional literary history of America, ignorant opinion, short-sighted generalization, platitude a dozen times repeated, that may be cleared in any American library to make room for this new work. It does not supersede the studies in esthetic criticism; it is not such a study; but it will be indispensable to the pure criticism of the future.

To describe the work:—Mr. Parrington begins with the conflict between conservative and liberal that had its onset with the Mathers of Boston and Roger Williams of Rhode Island. He follows on through the slow turnover, which was more a shift of emphasis than a change of subject, when theology gave way to politics and economics and the cleavage of the Revolution began. He traces the blending influences of government for property from England and government for "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" from France, describes the golden age of Virginia's romantic liberalism, which for the first time gets its due place as a source of American literary ideas, recurs to New England

and the new Toryism of the Federalists, moves on to the new West where the old struggle changes nature as the frontier populations desire both individualism and the expansive power of the coercive state, and returns to the débâcle of all old enthusiasms caught and crushed by an industrial revolution irresistible as fate. The course of a conflict which, like a moving battle, takes on new aspects with different combatants, but yet in objective remains always the same, is never obscured, but the method of this book is concrete. It is a study of personalities, of men, their character, their desires, their work, prefaced by the briefest of general essays for the guidance of the reader. The individual, not books, nor acts, is the subject, but the resultant of clashing interests, conflicting ideas, diverse temperaments in a common environment, is the theme.

Mr. Parrington is a partisan and his book is a partisan book. It is essentially a history of the warfare for democratic thought. It is as democratic in its prejudices as Macaulay is Whiggish, or Hilaire Belloc is Catholic. The Federalists are usually wrong; the Whigs are ever the enemy; to be an agrarian, particularly a Virginia agrarian is to be right-thinking and intellectually virtuous. Jefferson is a saint, Hamilton a sinner. (Washington whose forte was not the intellect, quite properly scarcely appears). The Calvinists are damned on earth as they damned themselves by pessimistic preference in heaven, and he spends so much energy in attacking them, that he has no time left for the work of the Quakers, which he underestimates. The com-



Jacket cover by Gluyas Williams for Christopher Morley's "Translations from the Chinese." (Doubleday, Page).

mon sense balance of Pennsylvania, which Henry Adams praised so highly, gets only a word in passing. New England is the enemy except in its rebels. Emerson, Williams, Thoreau; democracy is not only inevitable, it is the single desideratum. Character, culture, benevolence get short shrift unless they are on the right side.

Well, every good history is partisan. The impartial history is likely to be a collection of uninterpreted facts, which mean nothing until the partisan, with a faith to support, erects them into a theory. We have always had, and we shall continue to have until the next epoch begins, histories of the United States that are either Hamiltonian or Jeffersonian. It is curious that in the years since the War, when political realism has so willingly, in so many countries, sacrificed the possible perfectible man to the immediately successful business, America should have produced so many books in praise of Jefferson and his romantic liberalism. Perhaps it is significant. The middle class monster has opened

his jaws. We may at least look back before we are swallowed. Therefore to say that Mr. Parrington's book is inspired by a hot democracy, is anti-Federalist, anti-aristocratic, anti-capitalist, is by no means to condemn it. The writing of American literary history particularly, has been in the hands of the able Federalist or the pedantic dry-as-dust. The best criticism has been Federalist criticism; the conceptions of American ideas, and of American history, in which most of us were educated, are Federalist conceptions. New England educated the United States, and it was the New England of Edwards, of Dwight, of Longfellow, of Lowell that weighed upon the common schools and the colleges and impregnated the American mind with ideas of the sanctity of property, the ethics of conduct, the duty to work which Parker, Emerson, Thoreau flashed over but never undermined.

Therefore the warm side-taking of Mr. Parrington's book is welcome. It is alive, it is human; the struggles of the American mind are not abstract for him, they are vital; and it is the immense importance to him of American idealism which lifts his style, sends his pen ranging with loving care through the opposing arguments, sets the whole scene of two centuries of battle with a care for accuracy, justice, and fair play which only one intensely concerned in the outcome would be capable of. If Mr. Parrington is a writer with a thesis, so were his predecessors in both political and literary history, and he, far more than they, is aware of his prepossessions.

His chief weakness is esthetic. The studies of men of letters in these volumes are shrewd and revealing. His subjects are, for the first time, truly related to the web of circumstance, the complex of ideas from which they emerged. But it is with the important men who were not great writers that he is most successful—with Bryant, with Theodore Parker, with Simms, with Lowell, with Oliver Wendell Holmes. In Melville he is quite inadequate, because too much of Melville lies outside the chosen scene of conflict. His Emerson is admirable because Emerson is on every wave of his times; his Thoreau also in so far as Thoreau is a rebel; Poe he wisely leaves aside.

It is scarcely fair to criticize his book for its weakness in pure literary criticism, since literary criticism in its esthetic phase, is not his purpose, and may be well left to others who will build upon his new foundations. Yet the lack is indicative of a fault. Like Jefferson, who probably deserves Mr. Parrington's brevet of the greatest man in American history, though by no means all his praise, the author is neglectful of the laws of chance in an evolutionary system that may go backward as easily as forward. The hypothesis of a state where man is free to live at his best is an inspiring theme, and those who battle for it deserve to be called the sons of light. But the honest Federalists who believed in no such hope, and who put their faith in character and responsibility, would have been justified if French democracy had overturned the new Republic, and the pessimists who see in our present industrialization an approaching ruin of all that is fine in civilization, are not to be condemned if they believe that a pound of moral courage is worth more than a pound of democratic hope. There is more to be said for Edwards, for Hawthorne, for Godkin, for John Adams (though Parrington gives him nearly his due) than this book says. What one thinks of such men depends upon what one wants, and Mr. Parrington's wants are perhaps too hopeless of complete accomplishment to justify the tossing overboard of so much lofty skepticism, so much stern character, so much belief in the responsibility of the better brain for a future where better brains and finer living should be made possible just because these qualities once ranged good men against democracy. I accept his picture of the American struggle as just for the America that the clearest minds visualized, that Whitman believed in, that Emerson hoped for, but in the industrialized America of the future, even an Increase Mather, autocrat for a code, a Hamilton, who could turn petty economics into great ones, an Irving, poet of cultivated leisure, whom the author despises, might fight for the forces of light not darkness. The American story is not yet told, and all prophecy was not given to the priests of democracy.

It is impossible to review adequately two volumes so provocative, with such range of material, and so nice a workmanship, in brief space, the more so since temptation to set off upon speculations suggested by the text is almost irresistible. No higher

Main Currents in American Thought. The Colonial Mind; The Romantic Revolution in America. Vols. 1 and 2. By Vernon Louis Parrington. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1927. \$4 a volume.

praise than this, however, could be given to a book which deserves to be widely read, and must become standard in a field where controversy will always continue, but where facts, guidance, and reasoned judgment (no matter how partisan) have been conspicuously absent. It is this book, and not the inchoate and ill-proportioned "Cambridge History of American Literature," which should be the point of departure for every study in the developing American mind. Many readers will, literally, depart from its conclusions, but none will escape its influence.

Mr. Parrington is a professor in the University of Washington where the last wave of his democratic hope reached the Pacific, and perhaps this book could not have been written except in a West which still remembers, though it does not often practice, Jacksonian democracy. His heroes escape by good fortune the dogmatism of Yale or the selfishness of Harvard, his villains are warped by their New England education. It is cheering to one who believes in decentralization to see the sins of our fathers in culture returned upon their heads by a writer who in his intellectual history has at last escaped from New England into America. Nor has he left his skill, his scholarship, his culture behind.

Blackboard Versus Column

THE MYTH OF THE INDIVIDUAL. By CHARLES W. WOOD. New York: John Day. 1927. \$2.50.

Reviewed by JOSEPH J. JASTROW

WHETHER this is a book of consequence or futility depends upon how seriously one takes it. It introduces a phrase that may achieve longevity if not immortality. For Mr. Wood academic knowledge is truth "of the blackboard,"—an idol of abstraction. To Mr. Wood, I, as one of the guild, have been living all my life not only *with* a blackboard—which is true—but *on* a blackboard, which invites Mark Twain's comment upon the premature report of his death: "Greatly exaggerated." For my profession concerns mental life as a vivid, crowded reality, even though some of the findings may be put on a blackboard. But in recognizing in studium his true rival, Mr. Wood's instinct is right. Mr. Wood is a journalist; and the account of his career is interesting alike for its early limitations and his assurance that his "fellowship on the Boston and Maine Railroad . . . in the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen" taught him more of human nature than any academic Fellowship could have done; so be it.

Mr. Wood has emphatic opinions of his own upon highly vital topics that may possess more "locomotive" truth than is written or dreamt of in your blackboard philosophy. But as I hold that any academicism that is worth its salt must have a strong individualistic flavor, this does not worry me. I have a large sympathy, however tainted with the chalk of the blackboard, with his approach, which is that of an individualist despite the denial of his title. But the conclusion that studies are vanity because some are vainly pursued, and because to a certain mood academic thinking seems a procession of false leads, and comes to life only when vitalized by a generous baptism, even to total immersion, in the waters of reality, is, to adopt Mr. Wood's constant lapse into paradox, both true and false,—and to me by that token false. We agree that truth comes from life: and journalism reflects life, has indeed no other warrant. Yet Mr. Wood, by occupation a journalist, is a philosopher by inclination and intention. In a retort courteous I place him as an exemplar of columnar philosophy,—a brand telling and true enough for the purposes of the daily column, which gives the commuter a reflective "kick" on his way to the city, where it may serve to relieve the tedium of the market talk at lunch, but gives way to a different nugget on the way home. He has ably expanded a columnar philosophy to a volume scale. His challenge becomes a geometrical contest of the blackboard versus the column. With purely academic money, I am backing the blackboard.

His denial of the individual comes dangerously near to an academic distinction. The thesis is this: human relations are the authentic reality; they arise from the social activities of men; they are the issues of cumulative thought and practice, of generations of relationships,—these so completely determine what each one of us is and does, that any "individual" contribution to that total responsiveness which each calls his life is negligibly slight. To

claim it as his own is the "myth." He is human only through this mighty cumulative stream of relations; without it he would be not a Crusoe—an obvious myth—but an anthropoid. The biological part of his conditioning—that which dominates in conditioning the life of a dog or an ape—recedes into insignificance in the perspective of behavior of a twentieth century specimen of American. Except as we stand on the achievements of a human past, our reach of true living would be a feeble grasp. In that sense the individual, if you like, is near to zero in the human equation, and becomes a myth insofar as a disregard of this cumulative collective conditioning through strata of socialized humanity may have brought us to think otherwise. The "John Smith" in the man of that name is a myth as much as the "John Doe" or "Richard Roe" that occupies a space that any other name may fill; he is at all events a speck. But if we accept for the day the thesis as interesting and worth while, we see no reason for not holding on to the accredited sense of individualism, which refers to the more or less distinctive and significant responsiveness so far as it is not wholly submerged in the conventional John-Smithiness of all of us. It is the part of "his" book that makes it reflect Mr. Wood's individualism, which remains vivid despite its official execution.

My point is that to say: "In order that there might be tooth-brushes man had to give up the whole principle of individualism," or "Funny thing, this human nature!" or that Mr. Rockefeller doesn't own his oil, or his money, has indeed to employ experts to spend it, while he can only be trusted to give away shiny dimes; that the steam-engine "knocked the whole family business into a cocked hat," or, to quote from the jacket: "America has moved out of the United States and into Oil and Steel and Electricity," or, "In times of peace there must be all-around war. But in times of war, there must be complete harmony," and an endless series of similar contributions to columnar philosophy, doesn't get you anywhere; it may be provocative—the favorite word of blurbs—and it may be just provoking. And despite this disguise, one has the impression that Mr. Wood has something to say. This is confirmed by the seriousness of the topics that he discusses,—humanity and morality, love and labor, sex and family, politics and capitalism, crime and social service, war and peace, business and human organization, and by the fact that with all the modernism and radicalism of his approach and his stroke and his game, he finds in the life and sayings of Jesus the most constant guide to the truth as he sees it through a journalistic glass, not darkly but with electric brilliance. One may be excused from the task of setting into some orderly array this definitely engaging set of reflections and opinions on significant issues. If it were a lighter example of columnar philosophy, it might be dismissed altogether.

Perhaps I am taking it too seriously. But it offers occasion to speculate what may be the next stage in popularization after the best-sellership of the "Story of Philosophy," in comparison a drab and retrospective offering, if the scholar is to be replaced by the columnist in such serious issues. It may be that the scholar fails by not letting himself go, often perhaps having little go in him; or that the journalist fails by not holding himself in, often having little to hold. If a journalist believes that literature is journalism with a white collar on, or journalism literature in its shirt-sleeves, this conviction may have no more serious effect than to determine the handling of his "stories;" but it may determine the total range and thought of his contributions. But when the subject matter is science, the resulting perspective and its distortion cuts deeper than form, and may, if it gathers a clientèle, affect mental habits and philosophy more seriously. And in the end it gets nowhere. Somehow one misses the background. It is only when a master blackboardist, such as Bertrand Russell, approaches the same range of problems with the definite intention to bring to a public intelligibility the concentrated results of his reflections, that we seem to have meat enough to justify all the seasoning that he may choose to add. The columnar philosopher mistakes the seasoning for the sandwich and cultivates a false taste and an unhygienic diet. It would be interesting to see the main points of Mr. Wood's contentions translated from the column to the blackboard and find out how far they fuse with the discoveries of other radical-minded and discerning individualists, congenial to Mr. Wood's companionship.

Untermeyer's Parodies

COLLECTED PARODIES. By LOUIS UNTERMAYER. New York: Harcourt, Brace. 1926. \$2.75.

Reviewed by LEE WILSON DODD

MR. UNTERMAYER is an accomplished poet, a masterly technician both in verse and prose, a man of wide reading, a sound critic, an admirable anthologist; and in addition to all these gifts he is amazingly clever, famous for his agile wit, his conversational sallies, and his incorrigible puns. It would seem, then, that nature has endowed him with every gift for the production of parody, that exquisite plaything of the sophisticated and critical mind. Yet his collected parodies are for one reader definitely disappointing. I say for one reader advisedly, because the art of parody deals with such delicate imponderables of the mind that it defies analysis. A supremely good parody rings the bell, that is about all one may venture to say about it. But does it ring the bell for all who are in any sense qualified to read it? Probably not. The poetry of Yeats, for example, may weave for you as inescapable a spell as for me, yet we may bring to the reading of Yeats subtle but enormous differences in feeling and apprehension—and, if so, what might strike me as a diabolically right parody of Yeats might very well seem to you narrowly but fatally to have missed its mark. I confess, with reluctance, that over and over again Mr. Untermeyer seems to me to have missed his mark. When I read his facile and expert parodies I am always expecting the bell to ring, but too often it does not do so. It could not surprise me to learn, however, that for many another reader it rings again and again.

It is true, of course, that no parodist, however gifted, is uniformly successful. As a parodist of prose Max Beerbohm is often—to my ear, at least—uncannily perfect; yet his "Christmas Garland" begins with a parody of Henry James which, though it catches the superficial manner, utterly misses the peculiar rhythm, the accent, of that tortuous but always beautifully cadenced prose. These may well seem esoteric considerations; but I believe they make all the difference in parody. You cannot, as a parodist, ring the bell for a given author unless you can reproduce the subtle, entirely personal rhythm of his words. It is just these rhythmical subtleties of style that are the signature of the man. Thus, Yeats could by no possibility have written the following two lines from Mr. Untermeyer's parody of his verse:

Down by the dashing waters the three wise men did go,
And there they cut a hazel wand and laid it in the snow.

There is nothing of Yeats there but the hazel wand—a rather small proportion, and that perhaps too obvious. Nor, though the first line was written by Coleridge, could Coleridge have written:

Alone, alone, all, all alone,
In lonely lands though he may be. . .

not because the second line does not harmonize with the first, but because—oh well, because I feel it in my bones that he could not! There is no proving these crepuscular matters. It is simply an assertion I am making because I believe it to be true.

In short, criticism of parody in verse so technically brilliant as Mr. Untermeyer's carries one into transcendental realms of discrimination, becomes entirely subjective—and therefore, doubtless, completely absurd. It is perhaps fairer to close by admitting that I can think of no second American poet who has parodied certain of his contemporaries one-half so well.

The Saturday Review OF LITERATURE

HENRY SEIDEL CANBY Editor
WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT Associate Editor
AMY LOVEMAN Associate Editor
CHRISTOPHER MORLEY Contributing Editor

Published weekly by The Saturday Review Co., Inc., Henry S. Canby, President, Roy E. Larsen, Vice-President, Noble A. Cathcart, Secretary-Treasurer, 25 West 45th Street, New York. Subscription rates, per year, postpaid: in the U. S. and Mexico, \$3.50; in Canada, \$4; in Great Britain, 18 shillings; elsewhere, \$4.50. All business communications should be addressed to Noble A. Cathcart, 25 West 45th Street, New York. Entered as second class matter, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 1, 1879. Vol. III. No. 48.

Copyright, 1927, by The Saturday Review Co., Inc.