

1. Ideas as Master Switches

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BOOKS of recent times remind us by their titles alone that ideas are weapons, also that ideas have consequences. Neither statement can be denied after the show of power which propaganda and counterpropaganda have given

the modern world—if their earlier impact, for instance, in the rise of Islam, the Crusades, or the French Revolution, stood in any danger of being forgotten. Ideas appear to be master switches that control enormous voltages of collective energy. “Thought control” is obviously the essence of any true dictatorship—as has been recognized from Aristotle to George Orwell—while so-called subversive ideas are the dynamite by which old worlds are blasted apart. In this generation we may need to remind ourselves that not all vital ideas are politico-economic ones. Less abruptly dramatic than the boiling over of long-simmering ideas to produce war and revolution, but no less striking in the history of the modern mind, are the results of a concept, say, like evolution, or of time and history about which Reinhold Niebuhr has lately written.

It seems clear that the proper study of mankind, from many points of view, is that of Man Thinking. A widespread urge to try to clarify the welter of past and present into some intellectual pattern, whether somber or hopeful, brought Spengler into favor after the First World War and Toynbee (incidentally a much better scholar and wiser guide) after the Second. A history of ideas in terms of the great globe itself—the symbols and stereotypes which they become in the cultures of all peoples—is a project too ambitious for even Professor Toynbee, although his “Study of History” contains inklings of that grand design. But in narrower fields the history of ideas is under constant cultivation by many hands. How ideas spring up in a certain social climate, how they act upon each other by fusion or compro-

mise or antagonism, how they harden into the common coin of clichés or vaporize into foggy generalities, and how they affect the people possessed by them—these are all matters that can be studied piecemeal. And following a given idea, say, from economics to politics to literature to education to religion and so on, can be as fascinating to the observer as, to the physiologist, the often unpredictable track through circulatory system and tissue of a radioactive isotope.

American literature is a particularly fruitful orchard for the historian of ideas. Since it began, this literary output has been consistently short on belles-lettres, long on writing that seeks to explain, analyze, exhort, and persuade. Moses Coit Tyler in his day made the most of his chances in writing those classic histories of colonial and Revolutionary literature. Forty years later the “Cambridge History of American Literature” gave certain able chapters to intellectual history, while from the other side of the fence a rising generation of historians led by Schlesinger, Nevins, and others began to utilize the literary and sub-literary records of the past with a knack and instinct outside the ken of George Bancroft. Almost a quarter century ago Vernon L. Parrington began to write, after years of reflection and teaching, the first pages of his



Vernon L. Parrington—“a tonic influence.”

“Main Currents in American Thought,” published in three volumes in 1927-30. Here for the first time our literary culture, including political oratory, polemics, pamphleteering and some journalism, was set in an ordered frame of social and economic thought. Impatiently brushing past the moral, esthetic, and conventionally “patriotic” issues that had long detained the literary historian, Parrington plunged straight to the heart of those ideas which actually nourished so much of this writing at the time it was done. The result was as germinal as Turner’s thesis about the frontier, Beard’s economic interpretation of politics and law, or the instrumentalism of James and Dewey in espousing an open, ever-changing world order. Other students rubbed their eyes, seized anew their tools of research, and began to stake out fresh and rewarding claims along the Mother Lode.

AND yet Parrington’s work, for all its still communicable enthusiasm, has many errors of judgment and some of fact. His chief shortcomings are typical of the fertile though not always wholly compatible marriage between intellectual and literary history. All that came into his net—from the Mathers and the Simple Cobbler of Aggawam down to Edgar Allan Poe and James Branch Cabell—was scrutinized from the same beloved point of view, that of liberal Jeffersonian agrarianism, and usually graded according to this preconceived measure. Such methods not only worked individual injustice but also oversimplified the course of American thought—though never to such extremes of distortion as in the later Marxist interpretations of the same literature or some of it, by V. F. Calverton, Granville Hicks, and Bernard Smith. The presence of too rigid an ideology at the writer’s elbow always means the sacrifice of good judgment and proportion in design. The historian of ideas who comes hunting through the preserves of literature with thesis in hand can be counted upon to flush game that has escaped the more conventional critic, but out of sheer exuberance to exceed his quota and return with a miscellaneous bag that is not lawfully defensible.

Beyond question, “Main Currents in American Thought” has had a tonic influence over the twenty years since its author’s untimely death in the summer of 1929. From his study at the University of Washington—a campus, by the way, which might use a few more brilliant grass-roots Populists today to counteract less healthy

influences both to the Right and the Left—Parrington went far to revolutionize the writing of literary history, and, with the support of certain critics and social historians, to lay foundations for the history of ideas in America. To ignore the new school has been almost impossible. Almost, I say, in deference to the distinguished example of Van Wyck Brooks, who has long since abandoned the vein he began in books like "The Wine of the Puritans" and "America's Coming-of-Age." If Parrington wrote literary history which became almost wholly a history of ideas, Mr. Brooks in his later years has contrived to write charming literary history very nearly drained of them. But the main drift has been otherwise. For example, the recent three-volume "Literary History of the United States," edited by Spiller, Thorp, Johnson, and Canby, written by many hands, gives proportionately much more space than the "Cambridge History" to tracing the configurations of ideas through three and a half centuries, along with examining the instruments of culture by which these ideas spread to the people. Also, the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, begun in 1940, has shown a constant interweaving of history with literature, along with liberal strands of economics, politics, esthetics, religion, and philosophy.

In fact, the historian of ideas working in this last quarter century has found himself in constant revolt against compartmentalization. Like the social historian and the specialist in comparative literature, in the pursuit of his interests he leaps walls and crosses borders in the landscape of knowledge laid out by more formal cultivators. And, like both the social historian and the folklorist, he is eager to welcome the broad-based and popular run-of-the-mill writing, chapbook as well as classic, photographs of the mass mind as well as the posed masterpieces of literary art or philosophy. He also owns kinship with the historian of philosophy, but their ways are not identical. Professor Arthur O. Lovejoy, of Johns Hopkins,—dean of our historians of ideas and one of the best—despite his predilection for uprooting ideas from the social humus whence they sprang and contemplating them under a bell jar—once explained how his calling differed from that of the student of philosophy. The chief difference, he found, is that his own guild tries to break down the aggregates found in schools of philosophy, to reduce them to "unit-ideas" much in the manner

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2. History Without Ideas

ELMER DAVIS



Elmer Davis

conscious thought in molding the fate of men."

Writing in 1896, Adams could contend with some plausibility as well as topical relevance that the fate of men had been largely molded by the expansion and contraction of the currency. But an Adams of all people might have been expected to remember that a century or so earlier the fate of men on this continent had been molded by conscious thought—including, in large degree, the thought of his own great-grandfather. The separation of the colonies from England may have been made inevitable by other and impersonal forces; but the way it happened, and still more what happened to the American states after that separation, was an achievement of conscious thought to which history can show few if any parallels.

But if Adams had survived till our time, he would have found plenty of reason for skepticism about the influence of thought, even though recent decades have played hob with his general philosophy of history. The dominance of the money-lenders, which he regarded as inevitable in an age of centralization and consolidation, was undone by a development which Spengler foresaw twenty years before it happened; and the alternative in Adams's systole and diastole, the preeminence of the "martial and imaginative" type, hardly fits our age when few martial men are imaginative and few imaginative men are willingly martial. But it cannot be said that the quarter century reviewed in this anniversary issue has been much affected by conscious thought; and if you look back over the conscious, and especially the articulate thought of that quarter century, you can only say, "Thank God."

IN HIS preface to "The Law of Civilization and Decay," Brooks Adams observed that the examination of long periods of history had convinced him of "the exceedingly small part played by con-

For any influence on the fate of man (except in one respect, to be noted presently) the ideas set forth in the most admired American literature of the past twenty-five years have been incompetent, irrelevant, immaterial, null, and void. This is no great news; it was demonstrated some years ago by Bernard de Voto in "The Literary Fallacy"—a work which provoked howls of execration, much of it personal; but no convincing reply. The novelists could indeed reply that they were not trying to mold the fate of men, they were only Painting the Thing as They Saw It. No doubt they faithfully depicted what they saw, but there seem to have been some aspects of the Thing that escaped their notice. For what was the Thing? The United States—an extensive and complex nation, contradictory, perplexing, and often exasperating; a nation composed of members of the human race, some good, some bad, and mostly mixed; a nation of which much might be said that is true while overlooking much else that is equally true. And a nation which is not merely the object of an artist's contemplation, but a fact of some importance in and to the world.

A nation which shortly before this quarter century began had made—for excellent reasons, which it never seemed quite to understand—the final decisive contribution to victory in a great war of coalitions. Which for a

