V. L. Parrington

Through the Avenue of Art

H. Lark Hall

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For my teachers

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Whereas a dialectical model provides structural unity to Main Currents, Parrington's definition of an intellectual and his or her social role provides thematic unity to its biographical portraits. In these Parrington's touchstone is not democratic radicalism, as it was before "The Democratic Spirit in American Letters" underwent its "liberal" revision. It is not the life of one idea but the life of ideas.

*Intellectuals and the Critical Idiom* of Main Currents

Many critics have remarked upon the highly personal quality of *Main Currents in American Thought*, observing that it usually is clear whether Parrington likes or dislikes the subjects he discusses and that these likes and dislikes are generally determined by whether or not a subject held liberal ideas. In *The Colonial Mind* Parrington obviously likes Roger Williams, Sam Adams, and Thomas Jefferson and dislikes the Mathers and Governor Hutchinson. In *The Romantic Revolution* he obviously likes William Gilmore Simms, Abraham Lincoln, William Ellery Channing, and Ralph Waldo Emerson and dislikes John Marshall, Fisher Ames, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. In *The Beginnings of Critical Realism* he obviously likes Walt Whitman and Henry George and dislikes General Ulysses Grant and Thomas Bailey Aldrich.

There are several figures in each volume, however, whose personality and political or economic philosophy, religious views, or literary work Parrington dislikes but whom he nevertheless admires because they had the ability to think abstractly, astutely supported their convictions in the face of changing circumstances and public criticism, and were genuinely committed to a cause or a system of belief even though that cause or belief was under attack. A simple classification based on evident like or dislike is insufficient for explaining, for example, how Parrington can criticize the failings in both John Adams's and John C. Calhoun's political beliefs but compare the two men favorably and praise them for having a firm grasp on abstract political theory. Nor is it sufficient for explaining how he can call
Jonathan Edwards a theological anachronism but express admiration for the intellectual qualities that enabled him to write *Freedom of the Will*; or for explaining why Edgar Allan Poe deserves to be called "the first of our artists and the first of our critics" but contributed nothing to the development of the democratic tradition in American literature; or for explaining why, despite his conservative prejudices, James Fenimore Cooper was so deeply troubled by the failures of democracy. Nor is it sufficient for explaining how he could oppose Daniel Webster's rigid constitutional legalism yet sympathetically describe him as a broken man whose potentially brilliant career foundered on the issue of slavery, or for explaining how the House of Adams could nurture both the finest flowers of eighteenth-century New England and the most perceptive critics of early twentieth-century society. In more personal terms, it is not even sufficient for explaining how Parrington could be strongly influenced by J. Allen Smith, then later call him the epitome of the naive first phase of Progressivism. 3

These instances suggest that Parrington was an open-minded critic who could set aside his personal biases to evaluate a figure's life and work. He developed a methodology that allowed him to treat literary artists and political, theological, and economic thinkers similarly by classifying them according to a shared style of mind rather than by vocation or ideological categories.

In his early years, studying under Lewis Gates at Harvard and on into his University of Oklahoma career, Parrington was influenced by French critic Hippolyte Taine. In his *History of English Literature* (translated into English in 1871), Taine applied current evolutionary thinking to explain the origins of writers' ideas, attributing them to heredity and environment. This deterministic scheme of interpreting a writer and his work as keys to "race, surroundings, and epoch" causes one to search for representative men who embody the prevailing spirit of their age. But such a method cannot account for variation from the type or from what is judged the dominant social and political ethos. In *Main Currents* the figures Parrington considered original thinkers, those who made the most outstanding contributions to American cultural life and political theory, were by definition not representative. Nor could they embody the spirit of their age, for such an internalization of prevailing norms would prevent the attainment of a detached, critical perspective on cultural and political development.

The preceding chapter illustrated how the portraits in Volume 2 could be categorized according to the typology that R. W. B. Lewis employs in *The American Adam*. Parrington sometimes likes and admires, sometimes dislikes and castigates, figures who express attitudes that allow them to be placed, albeit hypothetically, wholly within either Lewis's Party of Hope or Party of Memory. But of the figures in *Main Currents* who profoundly labored to reconcile older cultural and political ideals with newer challenges to those ideals, none can be said to belong wholly to either the parties of
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Hope or Memory. Rather, their quizzical stance toward the direction of American development or their dismay at finding themselves living in a world their background unsuited them for or, in the case of imaginative authors, their problems in finding the proper form to express the desired content, serve to make them candidates for a Party of Irony.

Parrington did not articulate a system of classification like Lewis's, but he worked with a more varied cultural array and a longer time span. It is more in accord with Parrington's explicit statements about his subjects to classify the scholars, critics, skeptics, and thoughtful authors who might be included in the Party of Irony as intellectuals. A focus on intellectuals not only entails a more sophisticated scheme of classification than the like-dislike approach and allows Parrington to treat, say, a political figure like Franklin, a religious figure like Channing, and a novelist like Howells as significant contributors to American thought. It also elucidates the apparently multiple and shifting connotations Parrington gives to such terms as idealism, romanticism, and realism.

In *The Colonial Mind*, romanticism—which Parrington primarily attributes to the impact of French revolutionary thinking on American political theory and to the impact of the native American environment on nineteenth-century economic practices—is absent as a key term. Absolutism, idealism, and realism are the three key terms that characterize the dominant voices in the political debate issuing in the creation of the republic. Here realism (or, more correctly, the potential for realism) is the synthesis of the conflict between the absolutism inherent in the older theories and past experience of Puritan theocrats, Whigs and Tories, and English-inspired thinkers and the idealism inherent in newer theories and present experience of Congregationalists, revolutionaries, and French-inspired thinkers. As a result, the intellectuals in Volume 1 do not so much transcend these three terms and the ideological attitudes they symbolize as they unify, in their realistic style of thought, both the idealistic and absolutistic positions.

Idealism, romanticism, and realism are the three terms that characterize the dominant voices in the debate that forms the dynamic structural basis of Volume 2. For Parrington, the true intellectual does not adhere to entirely romantic, realistic, or idealistic attitudes toward the nature of man, political and economic institutions, or the fabric of culture. Instead, the true intellectual transcends these three attitudes by tempering his romantic hopes for human betterment with a realistic appraisal of human history and potential in light of an idealistic theory of government that will ensure a just and equalitarian political and economic system.

In Volume 3 Parrington gives this transcendent intellectual blend a name—critical realism. Yet, as indicated by the difference between the titles of the second and third volumes (*The Romantic Revolution in America* and *The Beginnings of Critical Realism in America*), the development of the crit-
ical realism position entails a lessening of romantic optimism and an increasing sense of skepticism, pessimism, and irony about human nature, institutions, and culture.4

The Colonial Mind, 1620–1800

The first portrait in The Colonial Mind illustrates Volume 1’s critical idiom as well as the salient characteristics of Parrington’s definition of an intellectual. John Cotton is classed with John Winthrop as one of the “chief stewards of theocracy” and the epithet applied to him is “priest.” But it is not the priest, the role that subsumed his later years after 1637, in John Cotton that Parrington seeks to explain in his ten-page portrait. Rather, he is attracted by Cotton’s intellectual qualities, their sources, and their potential to change him from an open-minded scholar into a blind defender of the theocracy.

In the portrait Parrington first tells why he has chosen to describe Cotton: he was “the most authoritative representative in New England of the ideal of priestly stewardship.” The choice is based on Cotton as the representative embodiment of an ideal. Then Parrington undertakes his restorative task as a historian: “It is not easy today to judge fairly the life and work of John Cotton. No adequate biography has been written, and his dreams and aspirations lie forgotten in the grave of lost causes and forgotten faiths. But to the Boston freeman of his own day, Master John Cotton was a very great man.”5

Next he outlines Cotton’s features, first drawing attention to heredity and environment: “Of excellent family and sound university training, he was both a notable theologian and a courteous gentleman.” Before describing Cotton’s contributions to New England, Parrington devotes two and a half pages to his personality and identity as a scholar, at the outset writing that “from the hour when he entered Trinity College, Cambridge, at the age of thirteen, to his death in 1652, he was a bookman, and in sheer bulk of acquisition probably no man of his time outdid him. In Cotton Mather’s judgment he was ‘a most universal scholar, and a living system of the liberal arts, and a walking library.’”6 Not only did the conservative Cotton Mather respect him, but also the liberal Roger Williams, whose principles Cotton would so roundly refute in The Way of the Congregational Churches Cleared. Parrington attributes Cotton’s appeal to his character, which was manifested in his visage and bearing:

Good men were drawn to him by his sweetness of temper, and evil men were overawed by his venerable aspect. He seems to have been an altogether lovable person, with white hair framing a face that must have been nobly chisled, gentle-voiced, courteous, tactful, by nature “a tolerant man” who placidly bore with a dissentient and gladly discovered a friend in an antagonist.
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In addition, "however much he loved cloistered scholarship," Cotton's priestly role and eloquent preaching kept him in vital contact with his parishioners and thus "the immediate source of his great influence was the spoken rather than the written word." He was also well-known and esteemed in England, shining "as an intellectual light at the university" and counting as his friends Cromwell and other Puritan gentlemen and political figures.7

Yet Cotton had his faults. Ironically, they seem to be an outcome of his strengths, being related to his tolerant, scholarly nature. "His quiet yielding before opposition suggests that he may have been given to opportunism," and "his fondness for intellectual subtleties" prompted his grandson to call him "a most excellent casuist." Both of these traits were unfortunately reinforced by "his daily contact with narrow-minded and intolerant men" and "gave an unhappy bias to his later career." So Parrington singles out Cotton's Boston environment as the cause of the pitiable process by which "the priest . . . overcame the intellectual."8

Clearly, these environmental pressures were strong, for in addition to being a charismatic preacher and a respected English gentleman, he had "an openminded curiosity that made him receptive to new ideas and tempted him to play with doctrines that were intolerable to his bigoted associates. It was possibly this native sympathy with free speculation that drew him into the camp of Mistress Hutchinson with her doctrine of inner light."9 Interestingly, Parrington gives a psychological explanation for how Cotton's "openminded curiosity" and "native sympathy with free speculation" were hindered by his Boston environment and put into the service of casuistry. Cotton "was not a man to persecute and to harry, nor was he one to stand in isolated opposition to associates whom he respected." He yielded to the judgment of men such as Endicott and Dudley in the Hutchinson case, in the first whippings of the Quakers, and in urging the death penalty for King Philip's son and "the enslavement of the remnant of Philip's tribe." On this point, Parrington approvingly quotes James Truslow Adams's evaluation that although Cotton had "a broader mind and wider vision than any of the other clergy of the colony, he had not the courage to stand alone, beyond a certain point." After citing these explanations and charges, Parrington writes a passage that illuminates much of his own character as well as his empathy with the dilemma Cotton faced as a result of the conflicting claims of his personality, his scholarly predisposition, and his role in the theocracy:

An apologist—and whoever has felt the charm of John Cotton's personality easily becomes an apologist—will perhaps find some grounds of excuse for his later position. He was in an unhappy position. He was ill at ease in his mind, and his frequent tacking in the face of adverse winds was characteristic of the intellectual who sees all sides of the question.10

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But Parrington knows that empathy is an insufficient defense of Cotton's acts and looks beyond Cotton's "frequent tacking"—and beyond his admirable personal and intellectual qualities—for another due to Cotton's change of mind. Switching his own role from sympathetic biographer, Parrington writes that "the historian, however, will seek a more adequate explanation in the roots of his environment." At this point Parrington begins, appropriately, to focus on Cotton's social thought, and the concluding seven pages of the portrait are devoted to describing Cotton's contributions to the theocracy and how they reflect the twin claims of his theological training and his political experience in England before coming to America at age forty-six. Parrington argues:

The idealism of John Cotton was the fruit of his training, and his theocratic dreams were conditioned by the facts that he was both a Calvinist and a Carolinian gentleman. The fusion of these two influences resulted in the unique political theory of an ethical aristocracy, consecrated to moral stewardship in the state. A lifelong student of Calvin's Institutes, he found there a system of social organization that responded to every demand of the theologian and the aristocrat.11

Cotton's conception of a "Presbyterian Bible commonwealth" run by elders who were "responsible to God for the spiritual well-being of the people" was antithetical to "the doctrine of unlimited popular sovereignty," which was based on a democratic belief in natural rights. Nevertheless, such a conception had revolutionary social implications, for it "would substitute an aristocracy of the Saints for the landed aristocracy, and refashion society upon ethical rather than economic lines." Although Cotton's primary duty was "to assist the magistrates in checking the dangerous drift towards a democratic organization of church and state, which the new environment encouraged; and to defend the theocratic ideal against all critics," Parrington insists that the ethical basis of a theocracy was a "negation of the principle of hereditary aristocracy" as well as "the negation of democracy." Thus "it must be set down in John Cotton's accounts that he discouraged the transplanting of English aristocracy to the soil of Massachusetts."12

It may seem strange to see John Cotton enlisted in the camp of Hamiltonian critics and to see Parrington defend an opponent of democracy. But it is characteristic for him to evaluate whether his subjects contributed anything to the development of liberalism, and in Parrington's view, Cotton did. Yet he did so at great personal cost, for ultimately his defense of theocracy and Presbyterian principles against English critics caused him to close his once open mind to the Congregational principles expressed by Roger Williams and to the Antinomian implications of his own teachings.

In concluding the portrait, Parrington comments on how Cotton reacted to the social upheaval in England that was "threatening to submerge, not
only Presbyterianism, but the very social order in which he had been nurtured." Again giving a psychological explanation for Cotton's actions, he writes: "How easy it is for good men, in presence of the new and strange, to draw back in timid reaction; and failing to understand or fearing for their prestige, to charge upon the new and strange a host of evils that exist only in their panic imaginations!" Because he appreciates Cotton's personal qualities, his intellectual capacity and potential, the effects of his aristocratic English background on his political and social sympathies, and his ethical idealism that helped prevent the creation of a landed aristocracy in the New World, Parrington is generous in his final estimation of Cotton's reputation. He cites the prevailing spirit of the age as the causative factor in swaying Cotton toward intolerance of new ideas in his later years:

For this the age was more to blame than the man. It was no fault of John Cotton's that he was the child of a generation reared under the shadow of absolutism, fearful of underling aggression, unable to comprehend the excellence inhering in democratic faith. He reasoned according to his light; and if he rather too easily persuaded himself that the light which shined to him was the single divine light, he proved himself thereby an orthodox Puritan if not a catholic thinker.  

Cotton's portrait has been described at length because it so well illustrates the features of Parrington's definition of an intellectual and his role, providing a model by which nearly all of the other portraits in Main Currents can be evaluated. Those features may be summarized as follows:

1. John Cotton was a scholar, a bookman.
2. He did not cloister himself but participated in the life of the community; that is, he was an active scholar.
3. He was open, at least in his earlier years, to new ideas and tolerant of differing opinions.
4. Even in his later years, he was an idealist and astutely defended ethical principles in the face of opposition.
5. He underwent a period of intellectual change necessitated by a crisis that threatened his career.
6. He was a child of his age—in this case, an age of absolutism—yet contributed at least one liberalizing idea that would later serve the development of democracy in America.
7. He was unable to stand apart from his narrow-minded Boston environment, but he knew what it was to challenge the existing order, for he had abandoned his aristocratic background and promising career in England and removed to America.
8. His insight into the course of American development was informed by his knowledge of revolutionary English social and political changes. His Eu-
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ropean experience thereby gave him a cosmopolitan perspective on American experience which prevented him from becoming narrowly provincial in his thinking.

9. Because he lived in both England and Massachusetts, he literally lived in both an old world and a new world. Then, in the new world, he witnessed the order he had helped create being challenged by new ideas and shaped by the new environment. Thus, he twice experienced a sense of “dwelling between worlds.”

Once these major features are abstracted from Cotton’s portrait, Cotton begins to resemble Vernon Parrington, especially the Parrington portrayed in the 1918 “Autobiographical Sketch.” Although Parrington does not call himself an intellectual in the sketch, he does apply the term six times to Cotton. The portraits are similar because the painter sees a kindred style of mind in his subject. These similarities may be enumerated point by point:

1. Parrington was certainly a scholar and a bookman. An avid reader since boyhood, he pursued his education in the library stacks, not only at Emporia and Harvard but also at Washington, reading voluminously in preparation for writing *Main Currents*.

2. An inspiring, innovative, and engaging teacher throughout his adult life, he was no armchair philosopher but an active scholar in the Emersonian mold described in the “American Scholar” (1837).

3. In the first thirty-seven years of his life he made the transition—sometimes painfully—from farm life to small town life to Cambridge; from country boy to the Judge’s son to college professor; from nominal Republican to political radical; from Protestant Pietism to late nineteenth-century aestheticism to early twentieth-century Progressivism.

4. His succession of American literature courses at the University of Washington during the last two decades of his life indicates a remarkable facility for amassing new material and new ideas, yet this process was guided by his idealistic conception of democratic theory and the way art can affect people’s lives.

5. His experience of being fired at the University of Oklahoma led directly to his entry into “the field of modern social thought through the avenue of art.”

6. This entry, signified most dramatically by the publication of *Main Currents*, was made possible in part because he was born in an age of exploitation and came to intellectual maturity in an age of increasing doubt and uncertainty about the value of progress.

7. Parrington knew well the price and the gain of standing apart, having been an outsider at Harvard because of the socially and intellectually
cramping effects of his Kansas origins. Later, his approach to American literature and to American ideas would set him outside of traditional academic boundaries and methods.

8. His 1903–4 European grand tour convinced him that a cross-cultural perspective was essential to understanding American political, economic, cultural, and institutional development. The tour was supplemented by his cross-disciplinary interest in painting, architecture, modern languages, and the whole Anglo-American literary tradition. Clearly, he was no narrow academic but sought to be an intellectual cosmopolitan.

9. Having lived in the Midwest, in Cambridge, and in the Pacific Northwest, Parrington was sensitive to the differing geographic “worlds” within America. But most important, he felt that he belonged to a transitional intellectual generation, one that came to maturity at the beginning of the Progressive Era and began the work of reforming American society only to have the next generation that came to maturity after World War I criticize their elders’ political ideals and cultural values. This sense of dwelling between two worlds of thought, coupled with his experiences of changing allegiances from art to social thought, made him acutely sensitive to other intellectuals throughout American history who had undergone similar experiences.

Parrington’s practice of defining the visual images of the figures he discusses in Main Currents lends itself to his task as a biographer to personify and revivify his subjects and to his task as a historian to restore and clarify reputations. It is almost as if he is dusting off an old painting, squinting to discover the personality behind the cracked and faded canvas. The visual component in Main Currents is the reflection of Parrington’s long and lively interest in painting, in architecture, in prose style, and in poetry (where images and symbols are inextricably linked with denotative meaning). Parrington, however, pulls back from “the charm of Cotton’s personality” to resume his task of defining Cotton’s ideas, as if he were in a gallery and stepped away from a painting to gain another, more objective perspective and to consider it in the context of the rest of the exhibition.

Until Benjamin Franklin’s portrait appears, all of the figures in Volume 1 are religious Puritans and/or were born in England. After Franklin, the sphere of an intellectual’s activity shifts to the political and cultural life of the colonies and then that of the new nation. As a result, the way in which an intellectual stands apart and challenges or critically surveys American experience changes from a religious to a secular context, as more avenues of career and social identification open, concomitant with American development. In addition, for an intellectual to gain European experience and familiarity with the European origins of American ideas, he could not rely on the accident of birth but must either physically visit Europe, as Franklin did, or be well read in European political theory, as John Adams was. If a
person did neither of these things (and the second is the more important), in Parrington’s opinion he or she remained intellectually limited and narrowly provincial.

Franklin’s and Adams’s portraits illustrate, in different ways, the limitations of the realistic style of mind uninformed by idealism about human nature. Franklin is called “an intellectual cosmopolitan” whose “mind from early youth to extreme old age was curiously open and free,” but “by temperament he was what we should call today a sociologist. He cared little for abstract reasoning, but much for social betterment.” Though Parrington states at the portrait’s beginning that “the Calvinism in which he was bred left not the slightest trace upon him; and the middle-class world from which he emerged did not narrow his mind to its petty horizons,” in the end he observes that “a man who is less concerned with the golden pavements of the City of God than that the cobblestones on Chestnut Street in Philadelphia should be well and evenly laid . . . does not reveal the full measure of human aspiration.” He was not a great thinker, but “he proved himself a great and useful man.” In contrast, John Adams “in spite of his dogmatism and inconsistencies . . . remains the most notable political thinker—with the possible exception of John C. Calhoun—among American statesmen.” Parrington compares him to Samuel Johnson, stating that he “was an uncompromising realist who refused to be duped by fine dreams or humanitarian panaceas; he was much given to throwing cold water on the hope of social regeneration through political agencies.” Yet Parrington also ascribes to Adams’s “excellent qualities of mind and heart . . . A stubborn intellectual independence and a vigorous assertiveness” and praises him for “his refusal to hunt with the pack,” a trait resulting in unpopularity.14

As in John Winthrop’s case, both Franklin and Adams are too involved with affairs of state to be true intellectuals. But neither would suffer the fate of Cotton Mather, who let his once inquisitive mind become circumscribed by the boundaries of old Boston. Unlike his father, Increase, Cotton Mather failed to be enlarged by contact with European political ideas. This failure was not offset by his membership in the Royal Society or his scientific achievements. He did not know what it meant to dwell between worlds but was subsumed by his environment and by the absolutistic spirit of his age. When he closed his study windows to the fresh breezes of current thought (which were liberalizing and realistic), his mind turned inward and, in Parrington’s judgment, he became a grotesque caricature of a scholar, a psychological aberration interested only in psychological aberrations.15

Between John Cotton’s and Cotton Mather’s contrasting styles of mind—that is, between those who come close to fulfilling all nine of the features abstracted from Cotton’s portrait and those who fail, for various reasons, to fulfill the most critical features (numbers 4, 5, and 6 are variables that are not always significant)—most of the rest of the figures in Main Currents can be ranged. There is, however, one crucial exception. In
the case of creative writers, Parrington modifies his stipulations that an intellectual be an active scholar involved in the life of the community or in affairs of state and that he be open to European political ideas. Thus there are two categories of intellectuals in Main Currents: religious, political, and economic thinkers whose social thought is directed toward the idealistic betterment (in their view, for this category includes conservatives as well as liberals) of American society and government; and artists whose creative work may reflect daily experience and ideas but whose creativity must be nurtured by detachment and whose work must be firmly rooted in native grounds and not in European themes and locales.

If Parrington’s requirements for artists seem to indicate a surprising streak of aesthetic formalism, they also echo how he differentiated between literature expressly written as propaganda and literature originating in a love of beauty in his 1917 essay “Economics and Criticism.” If Parrington’s requirements that religious, political, and economic thinkers be well read in European theory places more weight on the autonomy of ideas than a strict application of an economic interpretation of history seems to allow, they also support his announcement in the Introduction to Volume 1 that “the child of two continents, America can be explained in its significant traits by neither alone.”

The first full-fledged portrait of a writer in Main Currents is of Philip Freneau. The life and career of this “poet of two revolutions” illustrates how Parrington modifies his general definition of an intellectual in the case of artists. The portrait opens with the statement: “It is fitting that our first outstanding poet should have been a liberal.” Then Parrington identifies political liberalism with idealism, observing: “The idealist has always seen deeper into the spirit of America than the realist, and been less complacent with halfway achievement. And it is equally fitting that his idealism should have got him into trouble with the dominant group of his generation.” Unlike John Cotton, Freneau was not afraid “to persecute and to harry” the exponents of authority in “the dominant group of his generation,” nor was he an aristocrat. Rather, he believed that “if government were truly democratized, if it concerned itself with realities, serving the people in the homely affairs and common needs of everyday life, there would be no need of aristocratic ceremonial.” Comparing Freneau to Tom Paine, Parrington identifies idealism with realism, claiming that “Freneau was an idealist, with his head full of ideas which to practical men were only silly French notions; and yet the idealist, in this matter of res publica, was the true realist.”

Thus Freneau unifies the three key terms of Volume 1 by combating the absolutism of the Federalists with an idealistic belief in a democratic, and therefore realistic, conception of the political state. In contrast, John Cotton could be said to have combated the democratic realism of the Congregationalists with his idealistic belief in an aristocratic, and therefore absolutistic, conception of the religious state.
Like Cotton, though, Freneau's life and career were divided into two major phases. In the first, such poems as "The Rising Glory of America" were written which supported the aims of the leaders—Adams, Hamilton, and Washington—of the Revolution of 1776. But after the Revolution of 1793 in France, Freneau parted company with the Federalists and became a Jacobin. This act ruined his reputation, not only because he held ideas antithetical to the dominant group but also because he began to express them in journalistic prose as the editor of the National Gazette, the rival liberal alternative to Hamilton's Federalist organ, the United States Gazette. 19

Of this second phase, Parrington comments that Freneau's literary activity "was remarkable. Songs and odes and satires came from his ready pen in unending stream, eager, cutting, vibrant with feeling." The stimulus to this activity came from two sources: the French uprising and a two-year sojourn, begun in 1775, in the West Indies and followed by voyages about the islands and along the American coast. During his removal from New York, he "was free to cultivate the romantic strain of poetry that was strong in him." But a period of stagnation soon followed upon his return, for "the spirit of romantic poetry was deadened by an unsympathetic environment." Then the French uprising occurred, and Freneau decided that "If he could not be a poet to America he would enlist in the army of democracy.... So Freneau enthusiastically joined with Paine and Jefferson in the partisan labor of spreading the new faith." 20

Like John Cotton, Freneau was open to European ideas and achieved a cosmopolitan perspective on American culture. Parrington approvingly writes that "if fresh fuel had not been brought from overseas to kindle anew his social enthusiasms, it is likely that he would have drifted into a stale and unprofitable old age." But no matter how sympathetic Parrington is to Freneau's political beliefs and admiring of his service in conveying French democratic ideals through the National Gazette and through poetry dealing with political figures and topics, in his final evaluation he criticizes Freneau for abandoning his role as poet and turning partisan during both phases of his career.

Toward the beginning of the portrait, Parrington had claimed:

The chief desire of Freneau's life was to be a poet, and if the country had not been turmoiled by revolution, doubtless he would have been content to "live unpromoted and write poems." But revolution and not poetry was the serious business of the age, and he chose to have a hand in that business.... He had only to stand apart from the turmoil, refusing to soil his hands with politics, and cultivate his faculty for verse, to have made himself the indisputable founder of American poetry. He was endowed with a romantic imagination and love of natural beauty, a generation before the romantic revival, and he might well have become a notable contributor to that revival.

But he refused to stand apart.
As a result, “his place in American letters was fixed by a Federalistic verdict,” based on his role as a democratic journalist. Thus Parrington’s task as a historian is to restore Freneau’s reputation as a poet, a task that had been impossible because “only within recent years has a collected edition of his poems been accessible, and his prose writings still remain buried in newspaper files.”

In concluding the portrait, Parrington writes that instead of becoming a notable poet, Freneau can most accurately be judged, like Paine and Jefferson and Franklin, as “a notable American.” That is no small achievement, but it was attained at both personal and professional cost.

After all, the poet in Freneau was deeper than the partisan. Despite his conviction that a sordid America cared nothing for poetry . . . his love of beauty was never killed nor the spring of poetic creation dried up . . . . His life was bitter and turbulent, cast in a bitter and turbulent age; yet he found some grains of comfort in the contemplation of nature and the exercise of the poet’s craft . . . . If he was not a great poet whom all the critics praise, he loved beauty and served it in a careless world among an indifferent people, and it ill becomes America to forget his contribution or deny him some portion of the honor that has fallen generously to others no more deserving.

If the scholarly John Cotton had turned liberal journalist, Parrington would have praised him. But when an artist like Freneau enters into public affairs and, under the influence of European ideas, writes upon political topics, Parrington accuses him of abandoning his proper role, for subjugating the call of beauty to a partisan call to ideological arms. As in Cotton’s case, the age is more to blame than the man for this shift in roles. Both men dwelt between changing intellectual worlds, but neither one could stand far enough apart from those changes to achieve a transcendent, ironic perspective on them and thus both were subsumed by their environments and the prevailing spirits of their ages.

Of the other two writers considered along with Freneau in the “French Group,” Joel Barlow suffers a similar fate. Barlow is praised for being “a thoroughgoing radical in economics and politics” and an intellectual cosmopolitan, but he was “no innovator in polite literature,” letting the “heroic note in the vein of a political pamphleteer” play havoc with the poetry of The Columbiad. In contrast, Hugh Henry Brackenridge escaped subjugating art to politics in Modern Chivalry. Brackenridge had collaborated with Freneau on “The Rising Glory of America,” but in his later years he remained “a free-lance critic, independent in thought and act . . . no vociferous party or class advocate given to enlisting God on his side.” In addition, unlike Barlow and his stultifying use of the grand style, “he is a refreshing person to come upon after one is satiated with the heroic.”

One clue to Brackenridge’s success is that, unlike Freneau and Cotton,
he refused to howl with the pack. A stout and unrepentant democrat, he was no visionary to shut his eyes to unpleasant facts lest they disturb his faith. As he considered the turbulent confusions of an America in rough process of democratization, he saw the evils as clearly as the hope, and it amused him to satirize those evils after the manner of Don Quixote.44

Another clue is that he “had become a thorough Westerner with a fresh point of view.” As a judge, traveling “among the stump fields of his Pennsylvania circuit he was equally removed from the cynicism of Hamilton and the romanticism of Barlow.” Though he was educated in the East at Princeton, from his western, outsider’s vantage point, he was able to aim Modern Chivalry’s satire “primarily at backwoods shortcomings, but with an eye that kept turning towards the older settlements to scrutinize their equal shortcomings.” In this respect, Brackenridge can be seen as anticipating the work of Cooper and other figures in Volume 2 who were troubled by Jacksonian egalitarianism but were committed to the ideal of democracy. By being able to see clearly both the evils and the hope as America underwent the “rough process of democratization” and by finding a balance between form, style, and content in his creative work,45 Brackenridge becomes the first artistic candidate for the Party of Irony in Main Currents. Fittingly, his portrait is the last to appear in Volume 1.

The Romantic Revolution in America, 1800–1860

Throughout The Romantic Revolution, the idealistic figure and romantic spirit of Thomas Jefferson are the criteria by which Parrington evaluates his subjects’ political ideas. The central problem in Volume 2, however, is whether that brand of idealism and romanticism can be realistically achieved. Parrington’s concern with the intellectual’s style of mind colors his portrait of Jefferson as much as his concern with Jefferson’s political principles. The techniques by which Parrington evaluated John Cotton are brought into play in this passage:

From the distinguished group of contemporary political thinkers Jefferson emerges as the preeminent intellectual, widely read, familiar with ideas, at home in the field of speculation, a critical observer of men and manners. All his life he was a student, and his devotion to his books, running often to fifteen hours a day, recalls the heroic zeal of the Puritan scholars. He was trained in the law, but he was too much the intellectual, too curious about all sorts of things, to remain a lawyer. For such a man the appeal of political speculation was irresistible, and early in life he began a wide reading in the political classics that far outweighed Coke and Blackstone in creative influence on his mind. He was equally at home with the English liberals of the seventeenth century and the French liberals of the eighteenth. . . . [H]e judged old world theory in the light of its applicability to
existing American conditions, and restrained his love of speculation by immediate practical considerations. The man of affairs kept a watchful eye on the philosopher in his study.\textsuperscript{a6}

Although Jefferson’s changes of mind did not have the effect, as Cotton’s did, of buttressing an outworn order, he did suffer reversals of reputation and knew what it was to dwell between worlds. Parrington explains that Jefferson was “apparently inconsistent, changing his program with the changing times,” seeming to his enemies devoid of principle. . . . One of the most bitterly hated and greatly loved men in the day when love and hate were intense, he was the spokesman of the new order at a time of transition from a dependent monarchical state, to an independent republican state. Back of the figure of Jefferson, with his aristocratic head set on a plebian frame, was the philosophy of a new age and a new people.\textsuperscript{a7}

Concurrent with the changes from volume to volume in the critical idiom of \textit{Main Currents} is a transformed possibility for the intellectual’s role. None of the changes in critical terms—from absolutism, idealism, realism to romanticism, idealism, realism to critical realism and pessimism and irony—affects the nine features abstracted from John Cotton’s portrait or the two modifications from artists abstracted from Philip Freneau’s portrait. Three portraits—one from each of the regions demarcating Volume 2’s structural divisions—will illustrate Parrington’s consistency in applying his criteria for attaining the status of an intellectual: Poe from the South, Cooper from the Middle East, and Webster from New England.

Particularly since the appearance of \textit{The Liberal Imagination}, Parrington’s treatment of Poe has been served up as evidence of his disregard in \textit{Main Currents} for the aesthetic, the belles-lettres, in favor of the didactic, the realistic. Fortunately, a focus on intellectuals helps to collapse this distinction, to offer a rebuttal to Trilling’s estimation of Parrington’s sensibility as artistically reductive and politically programmatic.\textsuperscript{a8}

The portrait of Poe may well have been seized upon as evidence of Parrington’s disregard of belles lettres simply because it is shorter (two and a half pages) than the typical portrait (ten to twelve pages) in \textit{Main Currents}. The length is not an indication, however, of Parrington’s knowledge of or interest in Poe. He imitated Poe’s techniques in his Harvard short story “The House of Memoire.” He was slated to give the 1892 commencement address at the College of Emporia on the influence of Edgar Allen Poe on contemporary literature. He incorporated Poe in his literature courses regularly at the University of Washington from at least 1912 onward. And he included a Poe section in “The Democratic Spirit in American Letters” that is close in tone to that in \textit{Main Currents}. The closing paragraph is instructive:
It ill becomes a democrat to censure Poe for the aloofness of his art from the world of reality. If there is one right which every rational society will ultimately regard as sacred, it is the right to free untrammeled expression. If the artist choose to remain aloof from his fellows, we can only accept that choice in the conviction that a free creativeness is nobler than any compulsion—be it even a compulsion to service.... In serving the cause of beauty in spite of an unsympathetic age Poe must be accounted a friend to the deeper purpose of democracy, which can be no other than the development of a fine and free individualism.29

After such high praise in 1916, why such abrupt treatment a decade later in The Romantic Revolution? The Poe section in Parrington's original manuscript is similar in length to that allotted the other figures—Bryant, Irving, Hawthorne, and Longfellow—grouped in a chapter titled "Romanticism and Democracy." All were deployed into separate sections and chapters in Main Currents, where the earlier estimations were usually revised. Bryant's poetry is judged as ephemeral in the early work, his journalism and criticism of capitalism judged highly in the later. Irving's class allegiances ensure his low estimation in both works. Hawthorne (whom Parrington had so loved at Harvard) and Poe are treated similarly in both works, with high ratings for their devotion to art; moreover, Hawthorne's epithet, "skeptic," aligns him closely with the intellectual's style of mind. And Longfellow, rated highly in "The Democratic Spirit" as "almost...a radical," is reduced in Main Currents to an aloof "poet of the library" with "little intellect...little creative originality." He receives as brief treatment as Poe, but Parrington's assessments of each contrast markedly.10

The reason for Parrington's later treatment of Poe is found not in these portrait changes but in the structural changes between the two manuscripts. Instead of the general "Romanticism and Democracy" chapter contained in the larger division of the proposed third book of "The Democratic Spirit," "Democracy and Individualism: 1800-1870," Poe is grouped in the more specific historical section "The Virginia Renaissance," the first part of the regionally focused "Mind of the South," which also includes sections titled "The Renaissance of Slavery" and "The Romance of the West." (Similarly, these last parts are expansions of "The Democratic Spirit" chapter "Democracy and Slavery: 1830-1860." ) Instead of appearing with two New York and two New England writers, Poe appears with economist John Taylor, conservative jurist John Marshall, and fellow southern authors William Wirt, Nathaniel Beverley Tucker, William Alexander Caruthers, and John Pendleton Kennedy. Instead of in the context of literary romanticism, he is considered in light of the "Heritage of Jeffersonianism." Here is another illustration of Parrington's self-definition shifting from that of an English professor grappling with the question of how literature reveals political allegiances to an intellectual historian weighing how a region participates in the formulation and transmission of ideas.
One may still criticize Parrington for a limited, politically driven conception of ideology and culture that lacks a sophisticated, nuanced understanding of the covert ways literature may be a source of cultural experience. But that is to convict him by late twentieth-century standards and to overlook the actual contribution he had made in transforming the study of literature into the study of culture. It is noteworthy that for Poe's portrait in Main Currents Parrington expunged the political rhetoric of "The Democratic Spirit" and evaluated him by aesthetic rather than democratic qualities. Moreover, it should be clear that to one valuing detachment as highly as Parrington, finding Poe "outside the main current of American thought" is not a condemnation but a salutation to a fellow traveler. Despite its length—which may partly result from its being perhaps the final section completed before the manuscripts of both The Colonial Mind and The Romantic Revolution were returned to Harcourt, Brace—the Poe portrait is remarkable for its defense of the very qualities that it has been deemed as denigrating.31

Poe is the only writer in "The Virginia Renaissance" as well as the only writer from the entire South whom Parrington does not criticize for abandoning or retreating from the demands of the artist-intellectual definition. Unlike the writers treated in The Colonial Mind, Poe did not participate explicitly in the liberal-conservative debate over the nature of American politics, economics, and culture. This is not a detriment but an asset, considered in light of Parrington's insistence that artists eschew involvement in public affairs and that their work spring from beauty and not from the ideological claims of propaganda. Neither heredity, environment, nor the spirit of the age can explain Poe's personality. That is the task of the abnormal psychologist, and "it is for the bellettrist to evaluate his theory and practice of art."32 Parrington here assumes neither role; he does not use his biographical skills to portray Poe's personality as he did with John Cotton nor attempt the restoration of his work's reputation as in the case of Frenau.

Because Poe's work is so clearly autonomous, bearing no explicit connection to the characteristics of the southern mind or to American political experience, Parrington evaluates him briefly, stressing Poe's contributions to the aesthetic component of the nation's cultural life. But these contributions are noteworthy:

He was an aesthete and a craftsman, the first American writer to be concerned with beauty alone. . . . He was the first of our artists and the first of our critics; and the surprising thing is that such a man should have made his appearance in an America given over to hostile ideals. He suffered much from his aloofness, but he gained much also. In the midst of gross and tawdry romanticism he refused to be swallowed up, but went his own way, a rebel in the cause of beauty.31

Like Melville, whom Parrington singles out as one of the most noteworthy writers of the Middle East, Poe also came "to shipwreck" on Amer-
ican materialism because "the day of the artist had not dawned in America." That day would not truly dawn for Parrington until Volume 3. In the meantime, the Poes and Melvilles would find it difficult to serve the cause of beauty among an indifferent people. Parrington's emphasis on American life as too utilitarian, too materialistic, too busy with everyday affairs to pause and read imaginative works is as characteristic as his emphasis on liberal ideas. The two emphases actually go hand in hand: a liberal nation is open-minded both to political innovations and to cultural experimentation. Therefore, one of the tests that the day of liberalism has not dawned is the fact that the day of the artist has not dawned either.  

Poe is the last figure treated in the section on the Virginia Renaissance, and thus his devotion to the ideal of beauty and art can be understood as the extreme expression of the romantic ("romantic" is the epithet Parrington applies to him) strain in Virginia letters. Here is an example where a key term functions with varied meanings in several critical contexts in Main Currents. A romantic view of the nature of man assumes man is inherently good and must be treated by equalitarian political principles. Romanticism in literature is a barrier to inclusion of common people and common experience (as well as to the realistic treatment of exceptional persons with exceptional experiences). Yet romanticism in political thought is synonymous with humanitarian idealism and allows the inclusion of all people—including black slaves—in political theory and practice. In Parrington's view, a realistic, liberal, equalitarian politics must include a romantic view of the nature of man; but realistic literature includes only the aspect of romanticism that encourages the role of imagination in creating art.

Poe was a romantic because his work belonged entirely to the realm of imagination. That is, he created his own fictive world instead of using the real world for his short stories' and poems' settings and materials. But Poe is an exception. Several other southern writers are criticized for treating the real world romantically in the tradition of Sir Walter Scott. Romanticism is not an adequate or appropriate form for accurately portraying the variety of experience comprising the content of their work. As examples, William Wirt forced Patrick Henry into a romantic model despite Henry's flaws, and Nathaniel Beverley Tucker confused art with propaganda, using romanticism to defend Calhoun's successionist policies in The Partisan Leader. Other southern writers failed to achieve Poe's artistry and autonomy because they were not committed enough to art as a vocation. Wirt's "excursions into the field of belles lettres were only pleasant outings from the courtroom"; and though John Pendleton Kennedy was one of the first practitioners of local color, his professional life took precedence over his creative ("He was a man of letters rather than a lawyer, and if he had eschewed politics and law and stuck to his pen our literature would have been greatly in his debt").  

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Poe is the standard by which William Gilmore Simms, the only literary figure in the section "The Renaisance of Slavery" treated seriously or at length, is evaluated. William J. Grayson and William Crafts are quickly dispatched; the other portraits focus on political figures—Calhoun, Alexander Stephens, the academic Francis Lieber—and legal scholar Hugh Swinton Legaré, the only figure in The Romantic Revolution specifically labeled "intellectual." Simms, the "Charleston romancer," could not detach himself from his environment and remained a romantic partisan to the southern cause. Simms's portrait includes a passage that reiterates the fundamentals of Parrington's critical theory as well as his charge that America is hostile to art:

It is a pity that he constructed himself to the shell of an outworn order, instead of realizing that social orders and institutions are significant to the novelist only as he stands apart from them, observing their ways and considering their interplay in the lives of men and women... If he had served his art more jealously, if he had learned from Poe to refuse the demands of inconsequential things, he would have viewed his beloved Charleston with keener eyes... He struggled as few other Americans have done to further the cause of letters in a desperate environment... Our literature has suffered few greater losses than this wasting of the genius of Gilmore Simms... It was the inevitable outcome of the conflict between the creative artist and the citizen of South Carolina. (Emphasis added)

Simms's use of frontier locales and treatment of native Americans, especially in The Yemassee, allows Parrington to compare him with James Fenimore Cooper. Thus Simms's portrait provides a bridge to the first artist-intellectual who appears in "The Mind of the Middle East," the second book of The Romantic Revolution.

When Parrington turns his attention from the mind of the South to the mind of the Middle East, he also shifts from portraying a variety of figures drawn from the spectrum of intellectual life to a more narrow selection drawn almost entirely from literary life. Only one figure, Horace Greeley, fits the category of social thinker—intellectual. Although Parrington describes the middle eastern mind as a potpourri that lacks the "coalescing unity of spirit and purpose" of a "common culture," the major features of his definition of artist-intellectuals does provide thematic consistency to Book II as well as continuity with Volume I and the two other regional "minds" described in The Romantic Revolution.

For example, as in Book I, literary romanticism is evaluated as a distorting tendency, pandering to the popular taste for the melodramatic and picturesque. The work of Charles Brockden Brown, Robert Montgomery Bird, Fitz-Greene Halleck, Washington Irving, and James Kirke Paulding all suffers to some degree either because the romantic conventions are the improper form for conveying their desired content or because their use of romantic settings prevents the inclusion of realistic detail.
In the case of Irving, "a boyish wit from the eighteenth century, a genial loiterer in the twilight of the old," Parrington’s major criticism is that he was not concerned with the events and ideas that were transforming contemporary America. He detached himself, but from the present, and looked fondly backward, ingratiating himself in a picturesque past undisturbed by progress. Clearly, Irving is a member in good standing of the Party of Memory. Though he gained the reputation of being America’s first man of letters, "there was in him nothing of the calm aloofness of the intellectual that stands apart to clarify its critical estimate, and none of the reforming zeal of the Puritan that is at peace only in the thick of a moral crusade."40

Parrington does judge the Knickerbocker History as a vital and enduring work. But it uses native materials drawn from Irving’s New York experience. When Irving’s European travels influence his choice of settings and themes, as in The Alhambra, or when he attempts to mine the vein of historical romance, as in the Astoria trilogy’s recounting of the western fur trade or in The Life of Washington, Parrington criticizes him for tiredly pursuing the picturesque. Although he was a “born humorist,” Irving lacked the true artist’s “brooding intellectuality, and instead of coming upon irony at the bottom of the cup—as the greater humorists have come upon it after life has had its way with them—he found there only sentiment and the dreary poetic.”41

Cooper is the only genuine product of the Middle East who seriously tries to master his craft, adapting romantic principles to native subjects, and to develop an analytic perspective on American politics and culture. The epithets that Parrington applies to Cooper (“critic”) and to Herman Melville (“pessimist”), the last figure treated in Book 2, are indicative of both men’s questioning stance toward the course of American development. In Parrington’s view, Melville did not achieve an intellectual perspective that transcended idealism, romanticism, and realism; rather, he possessed an idealizing mind that caused him to erect romantic dreams as a defense against reality and, in the end, led him to “Nirvana.”42 As in his discussion of Poe, Parrington does not attempt to unravel the mysteries of Melville’s personality. Cooper, Parrington asserts at the outset of his portrait, is also puzzling, and his character appears to embody “a bundle of contradictions.” But Parrington does try to resolve Cooper’s inconsistencies.

Parrington emphasizes that Cooper was torn between the staid virtues of his hereditary eighteenth-century aristocratic background and the “ bump-tious leveling” that characterized Jacksonian Democracy. In Cooper’s mind, “doubts and uncertainties” about democracy “dwelt side by side with stubborn dogmatisms” regarding the moral values of an older, simpler world. This made him the “barometer of a gusty generation,” for “his busy life covered the busy years of the great shift from an aristocratic order to a capitalistic order.” Although his temperamental prejudices and loyalties “ran at cross purposes” to his conscience,
he endeavored to reconcile the irreconcilable, and establish sure standards amid the wreck of all standards. He could not drift. He must discover some working agreement between the old America and the new, between the reputed excellencies of the traditional aristocratic order, and the reputed justice of the democratic ideal. . . . It is this fond lingering between worlds that sets Cooper apart from his fellows.43

Cooper not only fulfills the requirements of standing apart and of dwelling between worlds. He also spent seven crucial years in Europe (from June 1826 to November 1833), beginning in his thirty-seventh year. Parrington writes that “it is impossible to trace the steps of his intellectual development,” but he dates Cooper’s late shift from “provincial contentment” to a concern with political theory to his European travels, claiming that “no other American was so unsettled by contact with European civilization.” Cooper was not, evidently, a scholar or a bookman; Europe was his true university.

It made a critic of him and turned his mind to social and political problems. Europe appealed to his native aristocratic prejudices, but repelled his democratic; Jacksonian America appealed to his democratic prejudices, but rode roughshod over his aristocratic. He found himself nowhere at home. Puzzled and perturbed, he leveled his shaft at both worlds and sought a haven of refuge in vicarious existence.44

Torn between the past and the present, between intellectual worlds, and by “the contrast everywhere between the real and the ideal,” like Melville Cooper could never be wholly a realist, an idealist, or a romantic. Parrington does not defend the confusion that led Cooper on the one hand to praise a wholesome life lived close to the soil and on the other to a vindictive hatred of the frontier. But he admires Cooper’s struggle to abandon the old eighteenth-century principle of gentleman rule and the social stake theory and his attempt to evaluate the merits of the new nineteenth-century middle-class Yankee spirit of acquisitiveness. Parrington summarizes Cooper’s post-European outlook by, appropriately, comparing him to John Adams and then specifying how Cooper’s point of view was a complex mixture of the three key terms of Volume 2: “A realist in his long brooding over social and political evils, he was at heart an idealist greatly concerned with justice among men, with a romantic fondness for dwelling on the virtues of earlier days.” Cooper expressed this mixture most fully in his essays in The American Democrat and in The Monikins, a satire that criticizes the cant and hypocrisy of both English and American society, institutions, politics, and manners and “conceives of man as a queer mixture of good and evil . . . something nearer to Swift’s conception than to William Ellery Channing’s . . . prone to error even under a republican system.”45
Despite Cooper's attempts at objective analysis and his clear rejection of a naive Rousseauistic view of human nature, the Monikins is "sadly bungled." As in so many of Cooper's other novels, such as Home as Found, The Redskins, and the Anti-Rent trilogy, he could not separate his role as an artist from his role as a critic: "His romantic art suffered from the intrusion of realism; the romancer was constantly impelled to turn critic." But Cooper's most characteristic work, the five Leatherstocking tales and the sea tales, generally suffer the opposite flaw: in them Cooper romanticized the past and, influenced by French thought, idealized the natural man in a state of nature, beyond the bounds of both civilization and the frontier. Only in one novel, Wyandotte, was Cooper successful in substituting "a critical for a romantic treatment of materials," avoiding both the romanticization of Indians and of patriotism and probing "skillfully into the motives and impulses that divided honest men" during the revolutionary war.

In the portrait's conclusion Parrington enumerates Cooper's shortcomings as a romancer and critic, but he also praises Cooper—in the same terms that he praised Freneau—as a man and a democrat who "loved justice and decency more than popularity." In other words, he stood apart from current trends and astutely defended his own idealistic vision of the possibilities of democracy. Though Parrington does not call him an intellectual, Cooper fulfills almost all the major features of one. Because his creative work, influenced by his European travels, often mixes art with ideas and lets its political and social ends determine its imaginative means, he does not fulfill the two special requirements for artists. But his work illustrates Cooper's struggle to reconcile the old with the new and, by mirroring changes of mind, offers documentation of the troubling issues that other thoughtful members of his generation confronted. Cooper is significant because he is complex and contradictory; his portrait is significant because it shows Parrington's perception of the often ambiguous processes of intellectual change.

The treatment of intellectuals in "The Mind of New England," the third and last book in Volume 2 of Main Currents, is more conventional than in the earlier books for several reasons. The major figures of the New England Renaissance had long been considered important contributors to and shapers of American thought. Indeed, one of Parrington's objectives in Main Currents was to show that those figures were not the only contributors and shapers. In addition, the fact that a renaissance took place removed one of the barriers—hostility to artists, men of letters, and idealistic thinkers—that made it so difficult for other writers to pursue their craft and to devote their energies to their work. In short, New England fostered intellectual communities because of the particular historical confluence of a tradition of serious-minded thinking, the rise of liberalizing movements in the Unitarian church, the ethical response to slavery in the South, and the
impact of innovative European philosophical, religious, political, and economic ideas, which was partially (and ironically) made possible by increased American contact with Europe through industrialization and commercial growth.49

The uniqueness of Parrington's treatment of "the mind of New England" lies primarily in his interpretation and organization of his subjects and in his continued focus on the components of his definition of intellectuals and their roles. In his introduction to Book III, Parrington states that the major significance of the renaissance (1830-50) was that "for a brief time, at least, liberal ideas found a welcome in homes where they had hitherto been strangers; for a brief time the intellectual and not the merchant dominated New England." The confluence of liberalism with intellectualism was facilitated by the "reawakening of the ethical passion of Puritanism," which united "the New England minister, and spiritual heirs of the minister"—specified as the intellectuals and reformers—in a common search for

freedom for individual righteousness . . . not freedom for intellectual epicureanism, for romance, for aesthetic or pagan beauty. . . . They were too eager for the coming of the kingdom to dawdle over fiction or patronize the playhouse. They had been bred from their youth on printer's ink; they came of a race that had long respected the printed page.50

This unification of the minister with intellectuals and reformers in a broadly ethical and not a narrowly religious or artistic movement affects Parrington's treatment of intellectuals in two ways. The minister, at last freed from the dogmatisms of a dead system, now joins the ranks of social thinker-intellectuals. Partly as a result, there will be no artist-intellectuals—like Poe, concerned with beauty alone—in New England. In sum, we might say that the minister and the creative writer are now grouped together as men of letters, a category that unites the social thinker and the artist. What is most crucial is what unites them: a shared view of the nature of man which is fundamentally romantic in its moral stress on the perfectibility of human nature and the political necessity of making institutions responsive to human needs. Thus the renaissance is part and parcel of the romantic revolution that is the great theme of Volume 2; and the emergence of the category of "men of letters" foreshadows the development of critical realism, out of another confluence of liberalism and intellectualism, that is the theme of Volume 3.

Nevertheless, not all of the intellectuals in Book III are liberals. As one prime example, Parrington is not favorably disposed toward Daniel Webster's Whig politics and thinks he displayed "gross shortcomings in character." But he regards Webster as a "sound political scholar" who possessed a solid, if not creative, mind that was "strongly realistic and broadly philosophical, acute in analysis and with great powers of imagination." In his final judgment, Webster was "a great man, built on a great
pattern who never quite achieved a great life." Because Parrington is so generous in his praise, the reasons for his criticism are especially illuminating, and they go beyond the obvious fact that Webster’s "stately bark foundered in the squall of Abolitionism." 51

At the outset he explains that "Webster’s intellectual development falls into distinct and rather sharply defined periods." Appropriately employing the method used earlier in Lincoln’s portrait, Parrington traces Webster’s development through his speeches. The first period occurred before 1825, when "his mental processes were still under the dominion of the solid, rationalist eighteenth century," and his intellectual master was the English economic determinist James Harrington. The two speeches that exemplify this period both were delivered in 1820 and elucidate the stake-in-society principle: "Basis of the Senate" and "The First Settlement of New England." 52

Between 1824 and 1825, however, Webster broke "with the old English tradition," and the realistic philosopher "gave way to the lawyer, the politician, the opportunist of the unhappy later years." His earlier belief in laissez-faire economics and the diminished state "came into collision" with his constituents’ demands for "protective tariffs, internal improvements, and a policy of governmental paternalism." The speeches that exemplify this phase are his famous reply to Senator Robert Hayne in 1830, which defended Federalistic policies; his criticism of Calhoun in "The Constitution not a compact between Sovereign States" in 1833; and the "Declaration of Whig Principles and Purposes" in 1840. The third period began in the 1840s when, bitten by presidential ambitions (he ran unsuccessfully in 1836 and 1840), Webster turned his legalism to the issue of slavery. In his defense of the Fugitive Slave Bill of 1850 and in his Seventh of March speech in support of the Compromise of 1850, he made a "futile attempt to stifle the New England conscience by ramming the Constitution down its throat." 53

Parrington notes that since Webster’s death "both earlier and later phases of his career have fallen into the background, and the middle period of constitutional interpretation has stamped itself indelibly upon his fame." Parrington disagrees with this evaluation and sees greater value in Webster’s first period, when he exhibited "the solid reasoning of the political philosopher," which placed him in the "distinguished line of political realists, from Harrington through Locke and Burke, to Hamilton, Madison, and John Adams." 54 As a Jeffersonian and a believer in the decentralized state, Parrington was personally opposed to the Federalism of Webster’s early period and of his political forebears. But as an intellectual historian he was continually drawn to restore the scholarly reputation of those figures who grappled most soundly and vigorously with ideas.

Placing the foregoing analysis into the context of Parrington’s definition of an intellectual, we can conclude that there are two main reasons why
Webster "never achieved a great life." One is that, like so many other thinkers, he dwelt between worlds yet was hindered by environmental factors from reconciling the old with the new. "He was launched on a stormy sea," Parrington explained, "born too late to profit from the old mercantile Federalism to which his affections were always attached, and too early to profit by the industrial federalism that came to greatness after the Civil War." The other is that Webster "foolishly coveted" high civic honors, abandoning his role as a thinker and going beyond the sphere of the active scholar to pursue a career in public life.55

Webster's defense of slavery also placed him outside the main current of the New England Renaissance's ethical idealism. Indeed, his two later periods helped bring this renaissance to an end. To substantiate this point, at the beginning of the portrait Parrington contrasts Webster with Emerson, claiming that the two men respectively embodied the diverse New England tendencies that derived from the Puritan and the Yankee: the idealistic and the practical; the ethical and the rationalistic; the intellectual revolutionary, ready to turn the world upside down in theory, planting at the base of the established order the dynamite of ideas, and the soberly conservative, understanding the economic springs of political action, inclined to pessimism, neither wishing for Utopian change nor expecting it.

Further to delineate their mental contrasts, Parrington then paints a physical contrast between Emerson—the slender, nervous, unworlthy Puritan child of a long line of ministers—and Webster—the massive, stolid yet stately Yankee child who seemed to descend from a line of English squires. Later in the portrait, Parrington approvingly quotes Emerson's judgment of Webster as "a man who lives by his memory, a man of the past, not a man of faith or of hope."56

Although, like Webster, Emerson was vitally responsive to contemporary social movements and political events, he "surveyed his world with the detachment of posterity" and only reluctantly enjoined as a participant: "To be a critic rather than a fighter, and a critic because he was a poet and a philosopher—this was the duty laid on Emerson." Parrington was fully aware of the pejorative categorization (already a stereotype in the 1920s) of Emerson as the cheerful, sunny, "brilliant dispenser of aphorisms." Thus he takes pains to explain that moralistic pessimism was "thin gruel for the nourishment of a vigorous life" and avers that

despite the jaunty optimism of which he was often accused, his eyes were never blind to reality. . . . He did not shrink from the ugliest fact, and the unhappy condition he discovered men to be in would have discouraged a less robust faith. At times even he doubted. At times he seems half-persuaded, with Cotton Mather, that the potential children of light are strangely and fiercely possessed of the devil.57
STYLES OF MIND

Parrington does not claim that Emerson attained what Reinhold Neibuhr later called an ironic perspective on the human condition and the nature of institutions. But he does show that Emerson saw evil as well as good, dark as well as light, and sought to explain "the tragic gap between the real and the ideal." This capacity for double vision was facilitated by his trip to Europe in 1835, "where he discovered ways of thinking unknown to Concord and Boston, that effectively liberalized his mind and released him from the narrow Yankee provincialisms." The immediate intellectual result of the year abroad was the three influential essays Nature (1836), The American Scholar (1837), and The Divinity School Address (1838), followed by the second series of Essays (1844). These successive works show the elaboration of "the master idea of the Emersonian philosophy... the divine sufficiency of the individual." Parrington observes that this idea differed "only in its radiant dress" from the revolutionary conception, drawn from the French romantics, that had inspired Channing, Jefferson, and Rousseau and laid the basis of the nineteenth century's "ebullient democratic faith." 58

For Emerson, and for many of the other disparate renaissance figures, that utopian ebullience was soon modified by quotidian realities: the Industrial Revolution was submerging the older agrarian simplicity of New England, and the centralizing power of State Street was submerging the doctrine of the minimized state as well as the sacred rights of the individual. These were the very possibilities Jefferson had feared. As Parrington had predicted early in Jefferson's portrait in The Colonial Mind,

There had been created here the psychology and institutions of a decentralized society, with a corresponding exaltation of the individual and the breakdown of caste. In the broad spaces of America the old-world coercive state had dwindled to a mere police arrangement for parochial duties; the free citizen refused to be regimented; the several communities insisted on managing their affairs by their own agents. Such was the natural consequence of free economics; but with the turning of the tide would not the drift towards centralization nullify the results of earlier American experience and repeat here the unhappy history of European experience? 59

That "turning of the tide" produced the ironic outcome of the romantic revolution.