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History and the American Intellectual: Uses of a Usable Past

Writing during what must now appear to many as halcyon days of faith in the possibilities of social studies, Charles and Mary Beard could declare that “The history of a civilization, if intelligently conceived, may be an instrument of civilization.” ¹ Buried within what was clearly for the Beards a significant normative proposition—the call for a special kind of history—there rests a fundamental truth even more important for the student of a civilization. The idea of history itself, special kinds of historical studies and various attitudes toward history always play—whether intelligently conceived or not—a major role within a culture. That strange collection of assumptions, attitudes and ideas we have come to call a “world view” always contains a more or less specific view of the nature of history. Attitudes toward the past frequently become facts of profound consequence for the culture itself. Many students of historiography, of course, have expended much worthwhile energy in attempting to unearth the cultural causes of various approaches to the study of the past. This paper, however, suggests, with a series of broad hypotheses, the possibilities involved in a full-scale examination of the cultural consequences of special attitudes toward the past and the uses of history within a culture. In order to do so, I first would like to suggest in the most general sense how two kinds of treatments of the past, designated “mythic” and “historical” for purposes of the discussion, are related to each other and to culture. The rest of the essay proposes a basic outline of the history of some of these key relationships throughout American history.²

The idea of “history” itself belongs to a special kind of social and cultural organization. In status or community societies there is no written

¹ This is the first sentence of their introduction to The Rise of American Civilization (New York, 1927), p. vii.
² An earlier version of this paper was read to a joint American Studies Association—American Historical Association luncheon held in New York, December 28, 1960.
"history" (although there may be epics or chronicles). Myth predominates in the prevailing world view: a special class—most generally a priesthood—exists in whose hands the monopoly of the interpretation of the myths of the society resides. Few question the nature or kind of social order. The institutional and normative pattern remains relatively static. The myths are sufficient to unify the whole, to answer the largely emotional needs of the members of the community and to provide, when necessary, the collective dreams of the society about the past, the present and the future in the same instant. The myths "explain" all. The function of myth is largely utopian: it provides a vision of the future without providing in and of itself any essential dynamic element which might produce the means for bringing about any changes in the present order of things. Ritual is generally enough to assure the fulfillment of the promise of the myth.

History, however, comes into existence in contract or associational societies. Here the social order is changing in ways which contrast dramatically with the more static nature of a status society. New institutions and values arise; associations become increasingly defended not because they exist but because they fulfill a function which can be more clearly seen and understood. The social order itself must be rationalized; reasoned explanations are called for. It is history which can more reasonably explain the origin, the nature and the function of various institutions and their interaction. Further, history seems able to point the direction in which a dynamic society is moving. It brings order out of the disordered array that is the consequence of change itself. As a result history is often used as the basis for a political philosophy which while explaining the past offers also a way to change the future. History thus operates ideologically. But by the very nature of its enterprise and the very kind of society which calls it into existence, historical interpretation cannot be effectively monopolized for long by any special class or group. Its study is open to all who can reason and to all who participate in the various contractual or associational aspects of the society.

3 This distinction, so important in modern historiographical discussion, is made effectively in Benedetto Croce, History: Its Theory and Practice (London, 1920).

4 History arose in an effort to analyze new problems in a changing social order, problems now believed possible of such analysis by rational inquiry. Scientific inquiry had its origins in similar circumstances with the realization that the nature of the physical world was likewise amenable to such analysis. In both instances, of course, a special kind of professionalism developed. But again, in both instances, the existence of a special class of trained inquirers failed to give these men a real monopoly over their fields: others could use the results of such inquiries for their own purposes. This continues to be especially true in the study of history where special technical difficulties such as exist in today's scientific inquiry have really never developed. I am of course aware that there is in fact a kind of sociology of historians; not everyone was interested
Obviously what I have presented in excessively brief form is a contrast of two models of social organization and one significant element in the world view an investigator might be expected to discover in each. In status societies the prevailing attitude toward the past is mythic and its function utopian; in a contract society the past is viewed historically with consequent ideological uses. Probably no such ideal types ever existed. Certainly, for example, a contract society does not surrender its mythic elements; the psychological and social need for myth seems to persist in the most dynamic and rationalized social organizations. For it is in the realm of myth, in my usage, to provide much of the vision, the hopes and the dreams of any group. Myth, therefore, continues as what I call the utopian element in any world view, although I would like to suggest that in a complex contract society the number and kinds of myths are multiplied and frequently conflict more dramatically than they would in an ideal status society.  

What is significant, then, about an historical approach to the past in the newer social order is not that it replaces a mythic approach or even that history sometimes finds itself in conflict with myth. I am not proposing only a battle between mythos and logos (although surely this too does exist) but a special interaction between myth and history, utopianism and ideology, which has significant cultural consequences for any society. History is frequently called upon to play a new role in relationship to the older mythic views. Perhaps a metaphor will explain what I have in mind. Myth traditionally provides the central drama of any social order—witness the sacred drama of the Christian myth. But history offers something vastly different in its ideal form. Since it is concerned with change, in history in every period. In the classical world history was generally written by and for members of the governing classes, for example. My point is simply that history could in fact be available to all who could read. It presented no special mysteries. Also, in the discussion that follows I am interested only in professional historians when they have an impact on the more general intellectual community. Obviously, after 1885 the professional historian is an important cultural fact, but I am more interested in the cultural consequences of the uses of history by intellectuals who may indeed not be professional historians.

I realize that my social categories are “ideal types” that are not perhaps acceptable for more sophisticated social analysis but I believe that they can still be useful in a more general way, a rough background for my analysis. I am sorry, too, to insist on my own usage for the words “myth,” “ideology,” “history” and “utopia.” I am well aware that others use these terms differently and, since precise definition would take more space than I may have, I hope that my meanings are clear from the context. I have been influenced in part by Kenneth Burke, “Ideology and Myth,” *Accent*, VII (Summer 1947), 195-205. Mr. Burke sees myth as a way of stating a culture’s “essence” in narrative terms. Two very important recent discussions of myth and ideology have been published by Ben Halpern: “The Dynamic Elements of Culture,” *Ethics*, LXV (July 1955), 253-69; “’Myth’ and ‘Ideology’ in Modern Usage,” *History and Theory*, I (1961), 129-49.
movement, the on-going course of action and ideas, since it is more clearly related to the dynamic aspects of social life, it provides what I have called an ideology as distinguished from a utopian vision. But the two frequently work hand in hand; myth provides the drama and history puts the show on the road. Myths often propose fundamental goals; history often defines and illuminates basic processes involved in achieving goals.

Philosophies of history—attitudes toward history as process—frequently influence the kind of action (or retreat to inaction) men adopt as a result of belief in a fundamental myth. If one needed further proof about this important relationship between myth and history, a brief examination of millennialist interpretations of history would prove most illuminating. All Christians believe in the central myth (and therefore promise) of their faith; but this belief clearly has different consequences culturally when coupled with different theories of history. Millennialism, as a special theory of history, is itself of crucial cultural importance. But those who hold a premillennialist view are going to act far differently in the world than those who hold a postmillennialist position, as any student of eighteenth- or nineteenth-century American intellectual and social history can attest, in spite of their fundamentally shared view of the truth of the Christian myth.6

In the complex relationship between myth and history within a culture it is clear that there are conditions which frequently lead to the attempt to use each cultural force—myth and history—in ways which emulate the natural function of the other. We are perhaps most clearly aware of the consequences that result from an attempt to make history into myth (or at least make history perform mythically). W. Lloyd Warner’s extended discussion of the particular uses of American history in his latest Yankee City volume provides a most graphic instance. Here history has in fact become myth, complete with ritual, pageant and even a kind of priesthood. A relatively complex contract society is unified, the existing social order justified, basic values reinforced and community goals sanctified—all by resort to major incidents in Yankee City’s history treated in mythic ways in which all citizens of the town are invited or perhaps socially compelled to share. In the process, however, something significantly different is made from history—and even the history of Yankee City and the U.S.A.—than as we usually think of it.7

6 While this point is obvious it unfortunately escapes too many writers. Stow Persons is consistently excellent in indicating these differences and their significance in his American Minds (New York, 1959).
But there is also a drive to make the myth something historically real; that is, to turn the utopian promise into a specific kind of ideology. The nineteenth century began its detailed search for an historical Christ, for example, undoubtedly to provide a rational basis for a belief in the Christian myth. But that very process of putting Christ in history has enormous cultural consequences for society and for the nature of Christianity itself. For once the chief mythic character of the Christian religion, the man-god who died and was reborn, became a figure within the limits of rational historical inquiry, he became subject to special interpretations and uses. Jesus became a great "representative man"—an idea which in its very nature was a threat to the mysteries of the Christian myth—who was a great moral teacher and prophet. By the end of the century the American people could be told that if they would truly walk "in His steps" they ought to become Christian socialists. They were presented with a set of immediate social consequences if He came to Chicago. Within a few decades He would become Comrade Christ, the social revolutionary.\(^8\) Ideological consequences of a striking kind result from the effort to make a mythic vision of the past function as history. But, if only to emphasize the problem, that very act of making history out of myth, the act of treating Jesus as an historical figure shaped by historical conditions and circumstances and shaping in turn his society and world as any great man might, opens the way to a variety of ideological uses, not just one. History is seldom the monopoly of the few as the interpretation of the mystery of myth may indeed be in some cultures. And as a result, it is this same historical Christ who could become in 1925 "The Man Nobody Knows," the eminently successful salesman-businessman of Bruce Barton.

I have selected two extreme examples of history becoming myth and myth becoming history to establish my basic hypothesis. Yet somewhere in between there is a special meeting ground between history and myth that frequently provides a key to the central tensions within a culture. It is in this area of the tensions between established myths and developing ideologies, between the efforts of converting history to mythic ends and of using history in its more traditionally ideological way, where much of the story will have to be told. This conflict is often quite clearly recognized by many intellectuals within the culture. Artists, especially, are able to see and use this important intellectual and cultural fact. Two novels will perhaps indicate the existence of this awareness. In Mel-

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\(^8\)For examples of this transformation see Upton Sinclair's extraordinary anthology of the literature of social protest, *The Cry for Justice* (Philadelphia, 1919). Book VII, 345-352, is called "Jesus" and in it appear many examples of the use of the historical Jesus as a figure of social protest.
Melville's *Billy Budd* many commentators have seen the significant use of both the myth of Christ and the myth of Adam. But too few have seen that these mythic representations are put into a very special and carefully defined historical context. For Melville goes to great lengths to set his scene within history—precisely and in some detail, with dates, events and all the trappings of historical reality. We see the mythic enactments against the backdrop of meticulously established historical detail, a particular time and place, a particular series of historically true events. It is the tension between the historical demands (ideology) and the mythic ones (utopia) that gives the novel its tragic pertinence. Sixty years later William Faulkner was to use the same kind of central tension in *A Fable*. The enactment of the Christ myth is again presented against a most specific and realistic historical background. Not only does Faulkner place his tale during the First World War as Melville did his during the aftermath of the French Revolution, but he also uses an amazing number of details that come from the actual history of that war. Thus it is this very tension between the mythic beliefs of a people—their visions, their hopes, their dreams—and the on-going, dynamic demands of their social life recorded by the students of the real past and the actual present (with perhaps an often implied future) which provides many artists with their theme, a theme reflecting a basic conflict within the culture itself. This is in fact one of the basic tensions which helps define the nature and kind of culture that exists.

American civilization begins with a unique set of cultural circumstances. On the shores of New England a group of able intellectuals—some ministers, others reflecting their important university training—established a kind of social order that was clearly, by definition, a contract society. It was organized on the theoretical base composed of a series of major compacts; it was prepared to carry out an on-going mission within history, the task no less than the reformation of the whole world. It was also, however, a social order committed with grave earnestness to a belief in the Christian myth. But intellectually, for its particular kind of organization to survive and its mission to be fulfilled, the myth alone, no matter how interpreted, would not suffice. It is always important to remember that this was a society dominated largely by those we would today call intellectuals. The nineteenth-century image of the alienated intellectual would surely seem strange to these Puritans, even to the Hutchinsons and Williamses and Taylors who were driven from the colony or forced to keep their private thoughts very private indeed. And these intellectuals who functioned as leaders from the very beginnings of the enterprise carried with them a special view of history;
they made the study of history and its interpretation a vital part of the cultural development of the colony. The view of history which the settlers and those who followed brought was one which clearly explained, defined and justified the specific kind of contractual society they proposed to establish and develop. The writing of history, the keeping of journals at least in part for historical purposes, the discussions of history in various sermons and addresses makes clear the central role—second only I would argue to the expounding of the Christian myth itself and its meanings—of historical inquiry to the colonizing efforts. For it is history which provides the ideology, the dynamic view that makes possible the onward movement of the society to its historically appointed task. The tension between the promise of the Christian myth and its obligations upon man and the promise of their special view of history and its demands forms a central theme in any analysis of the culture they built.

By the end of the seventeenth century that brilliant series of covenants and compromises, that essential tension between myth and ideology directed by America’s first intellectual elite, had broken down forever. In an almost final gesture, Cotton Mather characteristically resorted again to history in an effort to restore the old order socially and intellectually. But the age was over, the tensions too great; nothing—not even Mather’s monumental and most significant history—could save it. Two important groups, both denied an effective place within the old order, were now ready to face each other in a major struggle reflecting again a basic tension in the eighteenth century. Each had its own view of the nature of the process of history, derived in some measure from the original Puritan synthesis but each stressing its special aspects as ideology for its own kind and class.

The revivalists of the Great Awakening took the millenialist and providential elements of the old synthesis as their own. In their frankly supernatural view of history they saw in the revival movement itself the hope of the coming millennium. In their enthusiastic and optimistic view they were committed, then, to a theory of history which might provide an effective threat to the social order and stability in the name of the currently disinherited. On the other hand, the new leaders of the American social order who had taken over after the older Puritan leadership had faltered found it necessary to fight back with a philosophy of history and a view of American development that could be used to defend the newly-arrived-at contractual order in which they were now the elite, intellectually and socially. Stow Persons has shown with acute awareness how these men developed a cyclical theory of history without signi-
significant reference to the Christian myth and yet without attempting to deny this mythic vision directly. Rather, they stressed the law and order which ruled the universe in terms of clearly discernible moral qualities, qualities reflected most effectively in the accumulation of property and position, in the special moral character exemplified by their own group in society. Thus their theory of history justified the new social order and their place in it and sought to counter the "dangerous" theories of the enthusiasts and millennialists of the revival movement.9

The intellectual tensions of the century—and in some sense the real social tensions as well—were reflected in a basic conflict of historical theories, one in which the Christian myth was about to be actualized in time and thus posed a radical threat to the stability of the social order, and the other in which the Christian myth itself had become some sort of regularized goal at the end of history, a goal which might be best achieved through the orderly and moral progress of men under the leadership of those of good character and sound social position. The conservative philosophy of history of the Enlightenment in America largely dominated public policy and the newer intellectuals who espoused it continued to maintain effective control in society as had an earlier elite in Puritan New England.

By the second and third decades of the nineteenth century several important new factors could be witnessed on the American cultural scene. First, the intellectuals in the society could no longer easily assume that through the professions of the ministry or the law social power would be assured to them within the American community. The problem of vocation for the intellectual in America became for the first time a serious issue: for this reason Emerson's soul-searching struggle to find a proper vocation becomes a key symbolic instance for the student of the role of the intellectual in America. Secondly, the emergence of the idea of progress in its variant forms provided an easy view of the nature of history for every man and an all too easy rationalism that engulfed all before it. So much had history taken hold in American society that the very mystical and intuitive nature of fundamental myths seemed to lose place and meaning for many. So easily did the notion of progress adapt all events past and present to its use that the whole social order became too readily (for some) justified—any change, any development, any direction.

9 "The Cyclical Theory of History in Eighteenth Century America," American Quarterly, VI (Summer 1954), 147-69. This seems to me one of the most important articles on the Enlightenment in America and yet it is not sufficiently well known or used by those who continue to talk about the period in traditional ways, be they the ways of a Becker or a Boorstin.
For those who felt these dislocations there were several courses open. They might reject history in its currently accepted sense and seek beyond it or apart from it some sense of the importance and meaning of life. This, of course, was the path of Emerson and Thoreau who refused to allow rational historical analysis to take away from them the transcendental vision of the basic myths they still wished to and needed to believe in. If history did have a value, it was not the history as on-going process but rather the study of what might be abstracted from the past as a standard in the present—exactly those transcendent virtues and ideas that were unaffected by the relativities of the historical process itself.

This particular use of the past was of course not new nor was it uniquely the property of Emerson and his followers. The eighteenth-century elite had drawn on its studies of the classical world for models of behavior and conduct; the nineteenth century frequently found ideal patterns for society and morals (as well as art and architecture) in a special and static vision of the Middle Ages, Gothic and Romanesque; the later nineteenth century and early twentieth century looked especially to the glories of the Renaissance for standards of taste, virtue and judgment; and in the early twentieth century the American Humanists (following what they believed to be the lead of the Renaissance Humanists) again proposed a vision of the classical world as ideal. But such a use of history—abstract, outside of time and circumstances, detached from the whole process of development—was largely a device to overcome, to halt, to stem the tide of the on-going process itself. It was almost always the tool of a small elite and its effect was seldom widely felt. It was, in my terms, essentially an anti-historical use of history. Its function was mythic in purpose, but it failed too often to elicit a proper mythic response from the mass of society—no matter how monumental and overpowering its architectural representations all over the American landscape.

Perhaps more effective but still limited in appeal was the resort to myths of a purer kind in which more of the community might easily share. R.W.B. Lewis has sketched for us the story of The American Adam which deals with a major aspect of that effort. And if Emerson and the transcendentalists generally failed to reaffirm the vital mystery of their particular vision of the Godhead to large numbers of Americans, the continuing revivist tradition did keep alive a more readily emotional and social response to the Christian myth, although in this case once again usually related to a millenialist historical view whose considerable consequence I have previously suggested. The transcendentalist and revivist attempts to reassert the value and function of myth in American society are, after all, parts of a single process and in some very real sense tran-
scentualism can well be considered a kind of revivalism among the intellectuals.

But there were intellectuals in this period who did not turn away from the study of history itself. One of the most significant aspects of the intellectual history of the mid-nineteenth century is the special effort made by American intellectuals to recapture control over the study of history itself as a vehicle of intellectual and social influence and power. Most of these intellectuals had been trained, initially, for either the law or the ministry, the previous career patterns available to those intellectuals who sought power in American society. These intellectuals trained themselves in the best of the methods provided by the newer "scientific" historical scholarship then thriving in Germany. They were, moreover, much admired and much read by a goodly segment of the American community. In an age when a special kind of historical imagination flourished, these intellectuals discovered that through the writing of history itself they might achieve some of the ends their more a-historical fellows were unable to achieve.

But in capturing, in some meaningful sense at least, part of the intellectual leadership through their study of history, what ends were the Bancrofts and the Sparkses, the Prescotts and the Parkmans actually seeking? David Levin ably has shown how they conceived of history as a "romantic art" and how clearly they used the major devices of that art in their works of scholarship. They wrote colorful narrative history; they made characters and events come alive. But such history—and it is again being called for in our own age—with all its serious and studied scholarship yields itself to fulfilling the very kind of mythic function (albeit much more popularly received) in a way that the more self-conscious non-historical mythic efforts of the period seemingly failed to do. Almost always narrative history attempts a mythic function and the more carefully analytical history (most characteristic in the monographs and studies in the period from 1890 to 1940) lends itself to ideological uses.

In the unstable world of the nineteenth century, filled with change, teeming with developments bent on upsetting the fundamental nature of the social order itself—developments which were to include a civil war—these great historians of the middle of the century produced American epics. They provided, perhaps, a way of understanding what was happening through an almost mystical notion of the divine law of progress,

10 I have often wondered whether there is any significance in the fact that most of those who were originally headed for a career in law generally selected European history as their field of inquiry while those prepared for the ministry, like Sparks and Bancroft, devoted themselves to the American story.

11 History as a Romantic Art, (Stanford, Cal., 1959).
as in the case of Bancroft. Here is history offering hope without program, faith without a searching investigation of basic issues and problems. In the words of R. W. B. Lewis, Bancroft's kind of history was a demonstration "in historical terms of the validity of the hopeful legend, the legend of the second chance." 12 In the case of Parkman, on the other hand, history became a kind of tragedy, the unfulfilled promise of both savagery and civilization. But whether optimistic or pessimistic, the histories of the period provided certain fundamental values, a certain commitment to moral law, certain reinforcement through examples of exemplary social and political behavior. In spite of all their scholarship and science, then, these epic accounts are mythic in consequence in maintaining older social arrangements and values, utopian in essence and objective. These historians try to speak out as high priests in charge of interpreting a newer and more scientifically composed mythology. It is perhaps not surprising that a scholar like R. W. B. Lewis should discover mythic elements in their work similar to that in the work of some of those who rejected traditional historical analysis.

Mid-nineteenth-century American intellectuals adopted an approach to the study of the past that led to a fundamentally utopian outlook; the method of analysis was primarily mythic—no matter what the more formal trappings. This attitude toward history and toward the world itself reached a most dramatic climax in the 1880s—the decade in which more Americans sought to outline in print their utopian visions than perhaps any other decade in our history.13 Significantly, however, most of these attempts to devise a utopia were presented without any ideological basis which might indicate how the existing social order could propel itself toward the achievement of such a new and ideal ordering of society.

The intellectual historian fond of dramatic contrasts might delight in comparing the essential utopian outlook of much thought of the 1880s with the fundamental return to the historical vision of the 1890s. Such a contrast might easily, it is true, be overdrawn. But nevertheless, here, amidst a series of basic problems too harsh to be overlooked, too significantly earnest and demanding of immediate attention to be judged on the basis of a mythic view of some distant future, history emerged again as a vehicle for the intellectual with a new and special set of functions significantly in line with the ideological usefulness of certain attitudes toward history.

Many defenders of Frederick Jackson Turner and many critics have tried to sum up his greatness. Many have pointed to a considerable group

13 V. L. Parrington Jr., American Dreams (Providence, 1947) is an account of utopian works with a good checklist of titles.
of forerunners or precursors who held views similar to his. But the genius of Turner was essentially a simple and yet vital one culturally. He took a major American myth and made from it effective history. He took a utopian set of attitudes and beliefs and made them ideologically effective for his own times. First, he compiled no great narrative, used almost none of the current literary conventions. His was an effort in analysis. His starting point was not some vague feeling of instability but a set of specific problems in the American scene which were of significant moment in his own era—labor unrest, the farmers' revolt, the consequences of a vast new immigration, the rise of urban problems, a world-wide depression in the face of a world-wide transportation and communications revolution. He wanted to account for these problems; he wanted to suggest why they had not arisen previously in our history. He made, therefore, the frontier thesis, a long-established myth as many authorities agree, a major tool for social analysis. What is more, since he could reveal why America had developed the way she had, since he knew the key ingredient in producing the kind and quality of social institutions and character types that made America unique, his analysis might more easily provide some clues about what must be done to preserve that order. Thus his analysis might make it possible for one to act—not resign oneself to the myth of a second chance with some inevitable progress under God's benign direction nor surrender to the essential tragedy of the human condition nor carry on precisely as one had in the past under the leadership of one's betters.  

I hope this analysis will not be taken as approval of the kind of approach Turner and his followers undertook, or the kind of ideology that emerged in part because of that approach. Rather, I am suggesting that what followed from this kind of history was precisely that—an ideology and moreover one which was in striking ways to become in part the official American ideology since at least 1893. If from 1893 to 1963 Americans find themselves committed to a search for new frontiers to replace the one Turner announced was no more, they do so in large part because the study of history pointed the way ideologically. It is precisely because this did become a major ideological force, adapted to many ends in the America of the twentieth century, that there has been such a wide-scale

14 It is important at this juncture to recall Turner's extraordinary essay on "The Significance of History" which antedates his more famous paper of 1893 and which is really one of the earliest statements in the "New History" position that Beard and Robinson were to espouse. This essay is reprinted in The Varieties of History, ed. Fritz Stern (New York, 1956), pp. 197-206. For the setting out of which the Turner thesis itself came see Lee Benson, "The Historical Background of Turner's Frontier Essay," Agricultural History, XXV (April 1951), 59-82.
public debate on the validity of the so-called Turner thesis and that important groups of American intellectuals found it necessary to discuss the values which followed from a frontier America, values which some were trying to preserve in our century while others equally vigorously were trying to disavow them.\(^{15}\)

Out of the historical awareness that dawned in the 1890s in America came still another example of the importance of history as ideology. This involves another pattern of historical inquiry. If Turner turned a myth into history, others in the period, again for ideological purposes, attempted to take the mythic out of what had previously passed for history. All through the nineteenth century there had been a rumbling of dissatisfaction with the inheritance from seventeenth-century Puritan theology and social organization and values. One can point to many landmarks along the way which reveal the challenge to the Puritan tradition that had become so important a part of official American mythology. But the real explosion occurred in the 1890s—an explosion that was to continue to reverberate throughout American intellectual life until the 1940s.

For any student of culture one question must seem apparent at the outset. Why should anyone bother to attack the life and ideas of men long dead or a social order no longer in existence? Why, after all, in any culture should anyone, save perhaps those professionally involved with the study of the past, care about what the seventeenth century was really like? Yet in that great era of historical awareness beginning roughly in the 1890s, American intellectuals did care. They cared because they realized the vital ideological importance in a society like ours of history and the "proper" attitudes toward it. They cared because they realized that views held about the past generally had consequences for the present. It was not simply that the past "determined" the present in some rather simple casual order of things, but that the way one viewed the past had significant consequences on the way one acted in the present. It was precisely because in our kind of social order history becomes a key to ideology, a key to the world view that shapes programs and actions in the present and future. At least this was a fundamental view of the majority of American intellectuals in the period between 1890 and 1940. Since current ideology is based on a particular view of the nature of the past, since present problems are frequently solved by reference to the way past experience dealt with similar problems, the control over the

\(^{15}\) I have discussed this point in my article "The Useless Past: American Intellectuals and the Frontier Thesis, 1910-1930," Bucknell Review, XI (March 1963), 1-20. For ideological consequences of the kind I mean, see, for example, William Appleman Williams, "The Frontier Thesis and American Foreign Policy," The Pacific Coast Historical Review, XXIV (November 1953), 979-98.
interpretation of the nature of that past becomes a burning cultural issue. This is, in effect, the driving force behind the movement James Harvey Robinson called the "New History" in 1913; it colors the achievements of other professional historians like Charles Beard and Carl Becker. And it is not beside the point that these historians, like Turner, played significant roles in the general culture of their era that went way beyond their purely professional responsibilities. These attitudes in fact came generally to be held by a generation or more of intellectuals who were in no sense professional historians.

There is, of course, still a further assumption behind this historic struggle within history itself. Not only is it important that we have the "right" view of the past, the proper attitudes toward history, if we are to operate effectively in the world today and tomorrow, but also the right view, the proper attitudes can help us to solve our problems and change the course of the stream of history itself. This is why Van Wyck Brooks' call in 1918 for a "usable past" made sense to American intellectuals all through the period under discussion, no matter how they might agree or disagree about which view of the past was most especially useful. There was a basic agreement that an intelligent reading of the past might make possible man's intelligent direction over the future course of history.

The preoccupation of the brothers Adams with special phases of the American past is well known by students of our civilization. Further, there has been extensive discussion of these remarkable men against the background of the very special problems they faced as intellectuals in a society in which they seemed to have, in the current social order of their day, little place or function. They fit rather easily into the image of the alienated intellectual, that image which began to emerge significantly on the American scene in the nineteenth century. But the special relationship between this seeming lack of function and their interest in the study of the past has not been sufficiently explored. For as "aliens" seeking positions of intellectual authority and power, they did not follow the path of the transcendentalists in turning against the past or the tradition of the historians of the earlier days of the century who would become high priests for society by turning history into a special mythic form, an epic art. Rather, they turned to the study of the past in an effort to find a new ideological position that they could offer in refutation of accepted contemporary ideologies, ideologies justified by a view of the past currently in vogue and for them significantly untrue and dangerous.

If they told the story of the Antinomian controversy, for example, they did so not simply to set the record straight. (How few historians, professional or otherwise, really seem interested in the pastness of the past!) They did so because they believed that the defense of Puritan America, which had become part of the official creed, perpetuated values and social attitudes intolerable to them, impossible for the America they would see develop. If Brooks Adams, more forcefully than any figure before him and in advance of the more sophisticated analysis of the same relation made slightly later by Max Weber, undertook to relate the development of modern capitalism and the Reformation, he did so because he found Puritan values reinforcing capitalist values and the resultant social and economic organization destructive of the kind of culture he wished to see flourish in America. If as a result of the new economic man who emerged as a major social type from the fusion of capitalism and protestantism it was, as he believed, impossible to have a decent art, architecture and literature, and it was unlikely that an effective civilization could endure in the United States, obviously something must be done to modify if not overthrow the ruling ideology that perpetuated this social type. The Law of Civilization and Decay was in effect a kind of "new history." The philosophies of history advanced by Brooks and Henry Adams were not simply statements of pessimistic surrender to the world as it was, but a new reading of how the world got that way: an effective, critical beginning of a search for a new ideology that might produce a culture more agreeable. It would not be easy to achieve this reorganization, but the place to begin was clearly with a re-examination of the past and the effort to discover from such study the possible new laws that might provide a new dynamic approach to the world's problems. At the same time, of course, it might provide a new role for the intellectual as agent of discovery, critic of the old history, the old social order and the old ideology, and liaison to the new men of power bringing them a new history, a new ideology, new insights for the development of programs of action. If the older view of the Puritan past sanctified the purging of individualist dissent or the more vicious values and consequences of capitalism, it must give way to a new view, a true view of what the Puritans really were.

This form of intellectual activity became common in the period after 1890. The whole of American history and its official version came under the scrutiny of American intellectuals in a way unique in our development. The frontier past and its consequences for culture, the Puritan tradition and its results were but two areas of growing concern on the part of those who sought from a newer version of the American past some
new orientation for American civilization itself. It became especially
the function of the intellectual to find a useful past, a version of Ameri-
can history and of the nature of history itself that would propel America
on to the road to a desirable culture or at least provide the critical tools
with which to overthrow the official view—the view Van Wyck Brooks
suggested put a "talmudic seal" on institutions, values and policies repel-
ent to these intellectuals. Brooks and Lewis Mumford, for example, felt
they must rewrite our literary history, if only to provide some new basis
for literature in their own time and some worthwhile relationship be-
tween the artist, the intellectual, and his society. Other intellectuals
joined suit; their useful pasts frequently differed and they quarreled
about this among themselves. Southern agrarians, for whom the nature
of the southern past became a matter of vital concern, an obsession that
led literary men to write history and biography, found their view of the
past directly challenged, for example, by the views of a growing number
of Marxist intellectuals. Some were concerned only with "debunking"
the past—a new and rather common pastime, introducing a new word
into the language itself; others developed more profound philosophies of
history. But the fundamental point remains: during this era in our in-
tellectual development attitudes toward history played a key role in many
debates and all seemed to agree that some special view of the past was
necessary, some view of history which challenged the assumed truths
about the past and the ideological positions based on such "truths."

The extraordinary importance placed on the control of the past was
reflected in all fields of activity. The Social Gospel movement depended
upon its special version of history and its special view of Christ's mission
in history. Certain factions of the so-called Progressive movement made
the "New History" a key ally. It is ironic to think that a book as dry,
painfully detailed and scholarly as Beard's An Economic Interpretation
of the Constitution could become a work of political significance—but it
did for some Progressives. The New Criticism in literature (and the new
literature itself), while frequently believed to be antagonistic to historical
study, was in fact simply antagonistic to special versions of history. Many
literary figures found themselves in their battles with the entrenched
literary standards of the day forced to rewrite the whole of literary history
to support their own critical and creative activities. T. S. Eliot is but
one outstanding example of a "New Critic" who gave us, in rough out-
lines at least, a brand new version of European literary history. The most
advanced movements in the arts frequently were based in large part on

17 This present paper barely suggests one of the major attacks on the Puritan past. I
am at work on a fuller analysis of the whole question. But see esp. Frederick J. Hoffman,
a profound restudy of the past, be it in painting, in architecture or in music, in an effort to support the newer visions.

It is striking to examine from this perspective some of the major literary figures and their most important works. Here again the artist believed that somehow it was his special function (a function that would afford him special status, a way out of alienation) to make history his own, to offer in his art a vision of that history that would be more meaningful for culture. Ezra Pound became deeply involved in the study of America's past—as well as the past of Europe and China. The Cantos represent a major effort to come to grips with historical materials and to use them in a special mythic way. To many students of our civilization it must seem strange indeed to discover in the body of this complex and difficult work not simply allusions to John Adams and Martin Van Buren (two of Pound's special American heroes whom he believes American official history has ignored) but long passages from the writings of these men and other historical figures. For Pound was trying to "make it new" in this as in other areas, to provide for his audience some newer insight into what he believed was the true nature of the American tradition and therefore the special promise of American life. Hart Crane's The Bridge likewise insists on a special historical vision. And the career of William Carlos Williams can be assessed in terms of a persistent effort—from his earliest work to the end of his brilliant career—to make meaningful his nation's history in a special mythopoetic way. Williams is especially clear about his objective; he wished to make the past alive and important in the present. Official or "scientific history" was for Williams a lie. It was the kind of history that "portrays us in generic patterns, like effigies or the carving on sarcophagi, which say nothing save, of such and such a man, that he is dead." It is the pastness of the past which is dangerous for a culture. We need history, for when we regret the past, not realizing that "what we are has its origins in what the nation in the past has been," we lose immeasurably because of our ignorance. The past, as brought to new and meaningful light by the artist's imagination which makes it present to us all, is "our greatest well of inspiration, our greatest hope of freedom (since the future is totally blank, if not black.)" 18

Thus the culture of America in the period between 1890 and 1940 was based in large measure on a view of the importance of history in solving human problems on every level and on a firm commitment to the special role that the intellectual might develop for himself in a world in which he felt alien as critic of the official ideology and champion of the truer meanings of the nation. Toward the end of this period, it is clear, what

18 In the American Grain (New York, 1925), pp. 188, 109, 189. Italics in the original.
Richard Chase has called *The Quest for Myth* again became a major occupational and imaginative concern for many artists and intellectuals. The need for myth began to reassert itself—be it the Christian myth or any number of mythic visions out of history. As depression and world war engulfed the world, the stabilizing and utopian function of myth again seemed important. But throughout the major portion of the period, leading figures dealt directly with the tensions created between history as myth and history as ideology in a brilliant effort to make a new civilization and to make it move in directions established by a newer historical view. It is this fact which gives special tone to the period and can in part be held responsible for the very special kind of cultural consequences that developed.\(^{18}\)

The last two decades in America have been marked by a singularly anti-historical spirit among the leading figures of our intellectual life. This trend, of course, had existed as a sharp undercurrent during the previous era as part of the ever-present tension between myth and ideology. I have already indicated the beginnings of what were to be a ground swell of interest in and search for (even conscious creation, if that is possible) myth. T. S. Eliot’s career can be seen, from one perspective, as a continual lyric battle raging within the poet himself between the mythic and the ideological, between the utopian vision and the historical. The “cunning passages, contrived corridors” of history that Eliot speaks of always presented for him dangerous traps from which man finally must escape. In *Four Quarts* it becomes clear to the poet that “right action is freedom from past and future also,” a vision of man in relation to history that stands in effective contrast to the views of his contemporary, William Carlos Williams, cited previously.

In the realm of religion the historically-oriented Social Gospel no longer commands the allegiance of the major Protestant intellectual leaders. The existential eye sees no historic Christ and no Christian mission that can be accomplished within time. The ideology of the Social Gospel depended upon a specific role of Christ in history and a view of the nature of history that made possible the achievement within history of a Christian society. The existential temper sees in the mythic Christ a “concrete absolute” which provided the model for those who would have the “Courage to Be” but who realize that within the relativities of history it is not really possible for man to solve any important problem facing him.

\(^{19}\)It might be well to recall at this point that the two novels I discussed in the first section of this paper in effect mark the beginning and end of the period under discussion, Melville’s novella at the start of the era and Faulkner’s novel marking in some real sense the end of an era.
Many of our newer literary vogues—some of them brilliantly evocative of major moral dilemmas of our time to be sure—are deliberately wedded to the present moment alone. For the Beat Generation the past—and even the future—is an enemy, threatening man with a vicious traditionalism (sometimes called conformity) or a series of problems to which there is no solution except individual action. They return to an almost Thoreau-like ritual burning of the past, preferring the immediate sensation, the experience of the moment or the escape into timelessness offered by some oriental philosophies (or their versions of them) which are strictly a-historical. Our leading movements in painting, especially abstract expressionism and "pop" art, offer the most immediate kind of experience, more clearly divorced from any sense of history than any other movement in painting since the Renaissance.

The study of history as a discipline has again become major literature, frequently superbly written and compiled, but often based on an underlying assumption clearly taken from American existential theology and stated most effectively by one of our leading intellectuals who is himself the writer of much admired history:

History is not a redeemer, promising to solve all human problems in time; nor is man capable of transcending the limitation of his being. Man generally is entangled in insoluble problems; history is a constant tragedy in which we are all involved, whose keynote is anxiety and frustration, not progress and fulfillment.20

It is a history, then, which escapes from ideology (in my sense) by returning to the mythic and dramatic. It specifically attacks the ideologies and the theories of history from which they came in the previous era. In its hostility to a Beard or a Turner it offers no new system of analysis, no new theory of the operation of the historical process. Rather, it disapproves of such theories and such ideologies. Once again, as in the middle of the nineteenth century, we return characteristically to the multivolume narrative historical work. In Arthur Schlesinger Jr. we discover our new Bancroft, ironically a pessimistic Bancroft. In Allan Nevins we find our own Parkman, albeit a surprisingly optimistic Parkman. And in Admiral Morison’s brilliant and many-volume history of the Navy during the Second World War we have perhaps the greatest literary achievement by any historian in our century. But in these works we look in vain for

20 This is of course from Arthur Schlesinger Jr.’s famous Partisan Review essay “The Causes of the American Civil War: A Note on Historical Sentimentalism,” written in 1949. The essay is most conveniently found in The Causes of the American Civil War, ed. E. C. Rzewuski (Boston, 1961). The passage I have quoted appears on pp. 189-90 in that text.
a vision of the past which will enable us to remake the present and the future. Here ideology is specifically rejected. Here we find a history which offers a reinforcement of current moral values and no effective challenge to the decision makers within the social order who do most frequently operate in terms of some view of history, some ideology. It is characteristic, in fact, of many American intellectuals these days to talk about how Americans have traditionally solved the problems that faced them—when they were in fact able to solve them at all—pragmatically and without reference to ideology. But the fact remains that there are many ways to solve a given problem and the choice of specific solution is frequently determined by a set of attitudes toward history which may be unarticulated but are within the consciousness. And if this paper has any validity at all, it should be clear that a retreat from ideology to the mythic use of the past has its special cultural consequences as well. Thus our own age retreats from history or derives intense excitement from what is often called "history" in its most brilliant mythic or theological forms (witness the enthusiastic response to the works of Toynbee and Niebuhr). The escape from history leads us to the world of myth. And yet, surprisingly, in terms of my definition of myth, the new mythic vision seems almost anything but utopian, seems to offer no happy goals for man or culture. We are left with a mythic past, an anxious present and an anti-utopian, Orwellian future.

What I have briefly attempted to sketch in roughest and most general terms were five major periods reflecting the relationships between history and myth as they were developed by American intellectuals responding to the circumstances of their own eras. In the first social order, intellectuals led the way in attempting to stabilize the tension between myth and history to protect the very special contract society they had organized and to enable it to fulfill its mission within history. In the eighteenth century, in the wake of the failure of the first position, the newer intellectual and social elite continued to dominate with its own special conservative philosophy of history, highly rationalized and secularized, removed from the power of the Christian myth. This myth, however, supported by a millenialist philosophy of history, continued to galvanize the sons of the Great Awakening who found themselves in intellectual and social battle with the sons of the Enlightenment. With the special conditions and problems of the early nineteenth century came an entirely new approach to the problem and American intellectuals became, through the use of history but with the repudiation of its rational powers, essentially the mythologists of America, the creators and revitalizers of a series of major myths which dominated the culture and determined its signifi-
cantly utopian intellectual quality. In the last decade of the century a new intellectual order was born on the heels of a new social order created in part by the communications revolution, an order in which a special kind of historical awareness contributed a dynamic element and where once again the intellectuals, removed from seats of social or political power but frequently anxious to achieve such power or contribute to its effective use, brought to life for their own present a special new tension between the mythic and the historic, stressing the ideological significance of their work. Finally, in our own day history has become once again the enemy, useful only if it points up the mythic tragedy of our inability to solve our problems in any meaningful sense.

Of course there are still those conscious of history, although ironically it would seem that these days to have some view of the past which has clear-cut ideological consequences for the present and future is generally thought of as a special function of what is left of a radical tradition. But it is not unfair to see in the major intellectual trends of the years since World War II a fundamentally anti-historical view of the world. It is in fact a view which has been praised as marking the end of innocence or the end of ideology. But the cultural consequences of this triumph, so-called, over ideology, so-called, have yet to be assessed. In a world where leading intellectuals become committed to a view that human problems cannot really be solved, where the public ideology therefore too often goes unchallenged in our incredibly bipartisan age, where history flourishes most brilliantly in epic or mythic or theological forms, and yet where enormous problems do continue to confront us, there are grave dangers to the culture itself. But the fundamental tensions between the mythic and the ideological still remain, even though the balance may be tipped more to one side at the moment. Perhaps we are simply re-enacting the plot of our story as it was played out in the middle decades of the nineteenth century where once again great and frightening changes seemed too often more than man could handle. Perhaps there will yet be a reawakening, as there was in the 1890s, to the other real need and function of history in our kind of society. Perhaps there will even be another kind of social order.