Progressive Historians

The Paradox of American Politics

Also by Richard Hofstadter
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THE

PROGRESSIVE

HISTORIANS

Turner, Beard, Parrington

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CHAPTER 10

Economics and Criticism

Officially I am a teacher of English literature, but in reality my business in life is to wage war on the crude and selfish materialism that is biting so deeply into our national life and character.

—V. L. Parrington to the Rev. L. N. Linebaugh, June 16, 1908

He was concerned only with nuances.

—V. L. Parrington on Henry James

I

The most striking thing about the reputation of V. L. Parrington, as we think of it today, is its abrupt decline. On the appearance in 1927 of the first two of its three volumes, his Main Currents in American Thought won a more prompt and enthusiastic acceptance than the first important works of Turner and Beard. Liberal critics hailed it as a major work, and even the old-fashioned academic guardians of American literature were cordial. In the 1930's, the book had an influence that matched Turner's essays on the frontier and Beard's study of the Constitution; but where the controversies over Turner and Beard enlisted ardent combatants and in time provoked a large and fruitful literature, Parrington, after a few salient essays, was little scrutinized, and now tends to be overlooked. It is hard to re-create the excitement generated by Main Currents in the years between 1927 and the mid-1940's. In a famous essay, "Reality in America," written in 1940, Lionel Trilling attributed to Parrington "an influence on our conception of American culture which is not equaled by that of any other writer of the last two decades." Parrington's ideas, Trilling remarked, "are now the accepted ones wherever the college course in American literature is given by a teacher who conceives himself to be opposed to the genteel and the academic and in alliance with the vigorous and the actual. And whenever the liberal historian of America..."
finds occasion to take account of the national literature, ... it is Parrington who is his standard and guide. ... Parrington formulated in a classic way the suppositions about our culture which are held by the American middle class so far as that class is at all liberal in its social thought and so far as it begins to understand that literature has anything to do with society."

Even as late as 1950, when Parrington’s reputation had gone far on its course of decline (hastened by Trilling’s withering verdict that his mind was “rather too predictable to be consistently interesting”), Henry Steele Commager in his The American Mind professed that his deepest intellectual debt was to Parrington “whose great study of American thought has long been my inspiration and whose disciple I gladly acknowledge myself.” Commager’s judgment that Main Currents was “a magnificent tract calling upon Americans to be true to their past and worthy of their destiny” was widely shared among his colleagues in the historical profession. At about the same time a poll of American historians showed that among all books in their field published between 1920 and 1950 Parrington’s was the most highly esteemed, enjoying a narrow margin over Turner’s frontier essays and a substantial one over the Beards’ Rise of American Civilization.

For those of us who were young in the 1930’s and who responded to the democratic idealism of the Progressive tradition, this enthusiasm is easy to recall. Historians were just beginning to show a renewed interest in the history of ideas in America, and Parrington became available on the eve of a strong resurgence of concern with the subject, which was in turn stimulated by his own work. Reading him for the first time in 1938, I found his volumes immensely rewarding. What other historian had written about American letters with such a wealth of democratic enthusiasm? What other writer had covered the whole span of American letters from 1620 to the end of the nineteenth century in a work which had so much

of a personal stamp on it, and yet with so consistent an effort to put American writing into its social setting? As Howard Mumford Jones remembered it, Parrington “seemed for a time almost to obliterate literary histories”: “Who can forget the tingling sense of discovery with which we first read these lucid pages, followed his confident marshaling of masses of stubborn material into position, until book, chapter, and section became as orderly as a regiment on parade! Readers in 1927 felt the same quality of excitement, I imagine, as Jeffrey experienced when in 1825 young Macaulay sent his dazzling essay on Milton to the Edinburgh Review. All other histories of literature were compelled to pale their intellectual fires. ... Here was a usable past, adult, reasonable, coherent.”

Parrington indeed seemed at first wholly admirable, at least until one engaged oneself in the study of one of his idiosyncratic interpretations. Much that we learned from Parrington in the years after 1927 could perhaps have been learned in less partisan form from other writers. But we knew of few other writers of literary history who we thought could do much for us. Moses Colt Tyler’s four volumes (1878, 1897), which in any case only reached 1783 and thus left out nine tenths of what we knew as American literature, were relatively inaccessible and had fallen into undeserved neglect. A book like Barrett Wendell’s A Literary History of America (1900) we had been taught to laugh at by various critics of the genteel tradition, and without troubling to read it we concluded that we had nothing to learn from it. There were other surveys, most of them old-fashioned, academic, rather thin. Few people, I suppose, actually read the Cambridge History of American Literature (1917). Parrington, on the other hand, was salient and accessible, and had a live idea. He seemed much the most interesting, as well as inspiring, among the comprehensive writers on American literature—the one with whom a historian, a political scientist could find rapport. And many of us did at first learn a good deal from him—perhaps much that still lingers in the intellectual heritage of the prewar generations, unacknowledged not (one hopes) out of lack of gratitude but because this debt has

been so overlaid by other influences and so attenuated by the passing of time that it can no longer be distinguished and given voice.

During the 1940's Parrington rather quickly ceased to have a compelling interest for students of American literature, and in time historians too began to desert him. He is still widely read, of course, in fact more widely read in the paperback era than he was at the peak of his influence; but I suspect that he is read primarily as an object rather than a subject—that is, his work is one of those monuments by which one can take one's bearings as one finds one's way across the historic terrain of American thought, and it no longer has the force of authority or inspiration. Recently, in teaching a graduate seminar on American historiography, I discovered that students quickly became engaged once again in the complex debates over Beard on the Constitution and Turner on the frontier, but I could find no way to interest them in Parrington. A generation that has been reading Jean Genet, Henry Miller, and William Burroughs sees Parrington (along with so many others) as an incomprehensible square.

Yet, if we want to understand the presuppositions of the American Progressive mind and trace what has happened to it, we must again interest ourselves in a book which, as Alfred Kazin has put it, "represents the most ambitious single effort of the Progressive mind to understand itself." In fact, I found on rereading Main Currents little of the disappointment or boredom that afflicted me with the Beards' Rise of American Civilization, though I must confess that what now gave the work its interest for me was not so much in what I found there as in the intellectual games Parrington set in motion, the mild pleasure I found myself taking in the study of the architeconics of his book and its determined intellectual strategy. I could see once again some of the qualities that had made the book attractive. Parrington's was that rare thing among works of scholarship—a deeply felt book, full of vitality and passionate concern. He was, too—though I think my own generation did not at first quite see the full significance of this—a gifted melodramatist, and most of us at one time or another crave a bit of intellectual melodrama,

well done and closely cued to our prejudices of the moment. Parrington also had a distinctive style; and for anyone who has to read widely among historical monographs and surveys and in the literature of "social science," the presence of any personal note, of any style, even if it is a comic oddity like Veblen's or somewhat mannered and oratorical like Parrington's, is a welcome thing. Parrington's writing was courtly, self-conscious, a little over-formal, at times repetitious almost to the verge of echolalia, and at a few points his metaphors come along so fast that they seem to trip over each other, but it was still much better writing than one characteristically found in academic historians. It had an insistent, persuasive rhythm, and a certain masculine energy that was well suited both to his tendentious judgments and to the affectionate evocation of his heroes. Although he was not a writer of great biographical precision—his heroes tend to melt into each other and his villains do the same—some of his sketches, like his fierce account of Cotton Mather, were quite memorable even if not quite just. He could hit off rather well from time to time some aspect of a familiar figure—as when he spoke of Emerson's "superlative mastery of the sententious sentence" or of Whitman's "somewhat truculent pose of democratic undress" or when he called John Adams a "political counterpart of Dr. Johnson" or John Randolph "an arch individualist in opinions as other Americans were in acquisitiveness." He was one of the first literary historians to see the importance of the dawning Melville revival, and the first to see the significance of Brooks Adams. He had a good eye for the focal quotations in his subjects, and he seemed to know so much about so many writers one had never heard of, like Nathaniel Ward, John Pendleton Kennedy, and Nathaniel Beverley Tucker. At times his down-to-earth iconoclasm hit the mark cleanly, as in his treatment of the Davy Crockett legend. Now and then his perceptions seemed keener than those of other Progressive historians—he was one of the first, for example, to have a glimpse of the importance of the entrepreneurial and acquisitive side of Jacksonian democracy, and was perhaps the first to show interest in recovering the qualities of the antebellum Southern mind.
sharp evocative sequences that economically summoned up a whole era, such as his account of the Great Barbecue of the Gilded Age, in which he re-created the ugliness and capacity of the times through physical portraits of its leading figures. Whatever was wrong elsewhere, there was an imaginative quality in such passages that one hardly found in the work, say, even of so sound and learned a historian of American writing as Moses Coit Tyler.

Still, the decline in Parrington's reputation is as easy to account for as its eminence. Quite aside from the limitations of the Progressive imagination and from certain vulnerable idiosyncrasies in his interpretations, his book was designed neither as a history of political thought nor as a viable history of literature. Nor was it conceived as a many-sided history of the main currents in American thought: it was no part of Parrington's purpose, for example, to account for philosophic, scientific, or legal thought. Even with theology he had lost patience, despite his long sequence on the Puritans and his early desire to become a Presbyterian minister, and it commanded his interest only in a fitful and superficial way. Oddly enough, despite the importance of historical writing in American literature and its relevance to the democratic theme, he did not try to deal seriously or at length with the major historians. Only at a few points, and again superficially, was he concerned with aesthetic thought, and when he came to Poe, perhaps the first American to develop a distinctive and considered aesthetic, and certainly the first to develop one of consequence for the literature of the Western world, his response was to throw up his hands.

Essentially, Parrington's three volumes are a history of the literary aspect of American politics and of the most overtly political aspects of American letters. "I have undertaken," he explained, "to give some account of the development in American letters of certain germinal ideas that came to be reckoned traditionally American.... I have chosen to follow the broad path of our political, economic, and social development, rather than the narrower belles-lettres; and the main divisions of the study have been fixed by forces that are anterior to literary schools and movements, creating the body of ideas from which literary culture eventually springs."

Parrington's assumption that the experience recorded in belles lettres is more restricted in range—"narrower"—than experience in the political realm, and that literary ideas are in some way subordinate or posterior to political ideas led him to a rather stark politicization of literature. This conception, congenial to many minds nurtured in the Populist-Progressive tradition, became congenial again in the 1930's when the prospects of a proletarian literature were being widely and solemnly discussed and when Marxist critics like Granville Hicks, V. F. Calverton, and Bernard Smith seemed at times to be echoing Parrington's methods and some of his judgments; but it proved to be one of the less durable ideas in the history of criticism. Parrington's most eager reception was probably always among left or liberal intellectuals whose primary passion was not for literature.

In this sense Parrington's was a one-dimensional book, yet it was not this so much that made him passé—Americans are used to one-dimensional books on their literature, and some of the best have been of this order—but rather that the dimension he settled upon was fatal to his survival. For all his honest efforts to serve that which was up-to-date and modern, and to give aid and comfort to the avant-garde of his early maturity, which was represented by the struggle of realist and naturalist writers for acceptance, his seems now to have been a strikingly premodernist sensibility. The type of criticism and literary history he represented had always been under fire, and with the increasing academic influence of the New Criticism in the late 1930's and early 1940's, literary interest turned sharply away from the biographical, historical, sociological, and moral aspects of literature and toward just those aspects that Parrington was least concerned with: toward a close and exclusively interior analysis of texts, toward a preoccupation with language and with the mythological and symbolic aspects of writing, toward the literary manifestations of the unconscious and the irrational. By the early 1940's a complete critical jargon had
come into being which sounded as though it had been contrived in a world wholly alien to that of Parrington and his generation; and by then the very idea of any kind of literary history, as opposed to criticism, was decidedly on the defensive.

Moreover, aside from the effects of the New Criticism, readers were becoming interested in a kind of writing that made the pale modernism of Parrington’s era seem to belong to the nineteenth century. The new postwar modernism, with its sensationalism, its love of extremes and violence, its affection for the picaresque and the anti-hero, its interest in madness as a clue to the human, its candor about sexuality and its belief that the modes of sexuality embody or conceal symbols that are universally applicable and revealing, its sense of outrage, its distrust of institutions, its profound destructive intention, its persistent and almost hypnotic fascination with the deepest abysses of the human personality, seemed in many ways to be a transvaluation of everything Parrington cared about, and it thrust writers of Parrington’s type so sharply backward into the past that he now seemed (and with a certain truth) to have merged into the genteel tradition, to have become an old-fashioned moralist. Even the radical tendency of the new modernism had next to nothing in common with the radicalism of Parrington’s time. Where a Parringtonian looked askance upon established institutions as the possible agencies of human exploitation, judged issues from the standpoint of a certain sentimentality about the people, and questioned the inherited idea of progress only with sad regret, the radicalism of the new writing moved increasingly toward a ruthless individualism or a thoroughgoing anarchism, a complete indifference or hostility to the principles by which institutions are constituted, a mordant skepticism about progress, and a disposition to see the mass of men with more revulsion than pity. The mind of a man like Parrington was suspended, in honest doubt and hesitation, between the world of the progressive agrarian or bourgeois and the world of the supposedly ascendant proletariat. The mind of literary modernism is convinced beyond doubt or hesitation of the utter speciousness of bourgeois values, and it is altogether without hope, usually without interest, in the proletariat.

To those who were raised on the New Criticism, with its great show of analytical precision and its frequent academic fussiness, or to those who were wholly responsive to the latest phase of modernist writing, it seemed unlikely that a historian or biographer working with Parrington’s preconceptions could tell them anything they wanted to know about Whitman, Emerson, or Thoreau; a world of sensibility, responsive to such writers as Eliot, Pound, Joyce, and Lawrence, had come into being in which his critical canons seemed quite irrelevant. Perhaps the last moment at which Parrington’s kind of concern for the moral and social function of literature was likely to strike some positive response would have been during the first few years after the outbreak of World War II, when critics like Archibald MacLeish in The Irresponsibles (1940), Van Wyck Brooks in Opinions of Oliver Allston (1941), and Bernard De Voto in The Literary Fallacy (1944) attacked certain modern writers, among them Eliot, Pound, Hemingway, and Faulkner, for having failed to affirm the values of Western democratic culture. (It was in this period that Brooks likened Joyce to “the ash of a burnt-out cigar.”) But this was only a passing mood. The war, the bomb, the death camps wrote finis to an era in human sensibility, and many writers of the recent past were immolated in the ashes, caught like the people of Pompeii in the midst of life, some of them in curious postures of un consummated rebellion.

Troubled though it was, the world in which Parrington lived now seems one of comparative innocence and certainty. He was born in 1871 in Aurora, Illinois, where his father, a lawyer, was county clerk. The family was of English descent. Parrington’s grandfather, John, having emigrated from Yorkshire in the late 1820’s, and it had kept alive a tradition of English working-class radicalism. John Parrington had left England during a time of economic and social upheaval, when memories of Peterloo were still strong and rancorous. The introduction of new machinery had caused particularly acute distress among the hand-loom weavers of the industrial North,
an unusually literate and militant segment of the working class, and the Parrington family came from the industrial town of Barnsley, about twenty miles north of Sheffield, a center of radicalism where the workers had rioted just about at the time of the Parringtons' departure. Apparently an individual rebel as well as a political radical, John Parrington was an admirer of Tom Paine. He left his family a legacy of hatred for conservative England that can still be felt in his grandson's work. "It was an England," Parrington believed, "fit only to leave—for the economic underclass at least; and once my grandfather reached America hatred for the old home seems to have crept into his heart. My father shared this feeling and to the end of his life thought ill of England; and I think rightly, for that old sordid England richly deserved the hate of free souls." Immigrants to America, Parrington wrote in Main Currents, "very likely transmitted to their children a bitter hostility to the ways of an aristocratic society, the residuum of old grievances," and however conjectural this was for other immigrant families, it was certainly true for his own.

Parrington's father, John William, was born in the village of Gorham Corners, Maine, a dozen miles from Portland, where John Parrington had set up a small carpet-weaving mill. Although the family was impoverished not long afterward by John's death, the little community rallied around the widow and her four children in a warm-hearted fashion, and Parrington was raised to remember gratefully "the essential humanity that underlay the hard and niggardly life of that older New England." With the help of neighbors it was even possible to send John William to a local academy and to Waterville College (now Colby) from which he graduated in 1855. He then emigrated to Illinois, where he found a

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5 I, 130. On working-class conditions, with particular glimpses of Barnsley, see E. P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (1966), passim. For a touching illustration of some of the hazards of engaging in social protest in England at this time, see the letters between the Rev. Humphrey Price and Jeremy Bentham; Bentham, Works (ed. John Bowring, 1848), VI, 43–8.

6 On the family legacy, see Parrington's untitled biographical memoir, written for his children, dated February 1918. All reminiscent and self-characterizing statements from Parrington in the following pages, unless otherwise documented, are from this memoir, in the possession of Vernon Parrington, Jr.

place as principal of the high school in the town of Aurora. There he married Elizabeth McClellan, the daughter of a Scotch-Irishman of abolitionist views who had left the Baptist ministry to take up without much success a variety of trades. Parrington served as captain in the Union Army from 1863 to 1866, was wounded in the second attack on Petersburg, and was brevetted out at the rank of lieutenant colonel. He returned to begin the practice of law and to enter politics as a Republican. For a while, after he became clerk of the court of Kane County, Parrington moved to Geneva, Illinois, but he believed that his health required an outdoor occupation, and in 1877, when Vernon, his second son, was six, he took his family to eastern Kansas, and there on a farm in the little village of Americus not far from Emporia, the young Parrington had the earliest social experiences he could remember.

Americus, which Parrington recalls as a "crude and ugly" town, was in a corn-growing area of the prairies, flat, hot in summer, icy in winter, alternating between dust and muck in the dry and wet seasons. There, between the farm chores and the rural schoolhouse, Parrington got his first sense of the world; and if he later responded to Hamlin Garland's evocation of farm life—Garland, he wrote, "was no frontier romantic but a sober historian"—it was because Garland's Son of the Middle Border re-created to such a striking degree the circumstances of Parrington's early boyhood experience: the small, ugly farmhouses, the hazards of the cold and drought, and also the intermittent moments of warmth and liveliness, the pleasures of hunting, the promise of growing crops, and the spring flowers.

Although he could feel a good deal of nostalgia about his own boyhood, in which a warm family life always sustained him, the drabness and hardship of farm life were also unforgettable, and when Parrington begins to account for the impact of the frontier on literature he refers straight off to its spirit of "bitterness," and some form of the word bitter occurs no less than seven times in two pages. "It was no holiday job," he wrote, "to subdue an untamed land and wrest abundance and comfort from a virgin soil. Only for the young who can project their hopes
acknowledgment of intellectual kinship or indebtedness to Turner was made only casually,\(^8\) it was perhaps because the Turnerian sense of the reality and importance of the frontier and its relation to democracy was a part of his experience long years before Turner's first essay was written, and what the historian had to say did not have, for him, any of the force of revelation. In the 1880's Americus was still quite primitive, still raw physically and socially, and any glimpse of beauty or cultivation that anyone might find there—any touch of what Parrington would come to call romance—had to be found through some weighty effort of the imagination or put there through some assertion of will. The new house the family had built in 1879—"a house that even the softening touch of years could not beautify or render other than bleak and inhospitable"—stamped itself on Parrington's memory as a thing that "in its naked ugliness . . . seems to me to symbolize those years of farm life, which in spite of the romance which youth discovers in the crudest reality,

\(^7\) Ill, 260; on bitterness, 288–9. In his *Son of the Middle Border*, Garland, Parrington said, "has captured . . . truly the life that I knew and lived; every detail of discomfort and ugliness and rebellion which he sets down vividly I can match from my own experiences."
I was never so romantic as to believe were years of pleasant or desirable existence." If, in the Parringtonian esthetic, beauty sometimes seems to be a thing rather outside of and counterposed to "reality," it may be because beauty was something rarely to be found on the prairies, not a natural and organic effect of the surroundings, but a thing attained by effortful self-cultivation. That Parrington consciously schooled himself to surmount the dry ugliness of Americus we can hardly doubt. The prairie came alive with flowers in the spring, and he developed a love for them and a passion for gardening. Except for music, there was hardly an art or craft that did not fascinate him. At an early age he learned to paint, and he never lost interest in art. For a long time he wrote poetry, and for several years it was his major creative interest. In time he took such keen pleasure in architecture that he pursued the study of it for years, and formed his book almost compulsively on architectonic principles. He developed an interest in craftsmanship and carpentry that seems appropriate to an admirer of William Morris, and designed and helped to construct two of the houses in which he lived. Even in dress he was, as his father had been, meticulous during his early and middle years, and, for a Western farm boy, faintly dandyish; and to those who met him, for all his generous and democratic manners, he presented the aspect of an old-fashioned gentleman with aristocratic tastes and a fondness for elegance. A good deal of the somewhat awkward but tender concern about the place in life of esthetic values that can be found in his work may have grown from his sense of the separateness of art from the social and physical world, of the immense effort required to achieve some beauty, and perhaps from a lingering uncertainty about the legitimacy of such effort in the face of the world's visible injustices and unmet needs.

In 1884 Parrington's father, who had been an active member of the local Republican machine, was elected to a judgeship in the probate court, and the family moved to Emporia. Parrington and his brother John were sent to the College of Emporia—first to its preparatory department and then to the collegiate division. A tiny church "college" spon-
sored by the Presbyterians, Emporia offered the familiar classical curriculum—heavy doses of Greek, Latin, and mathematics, drearily taught, along with careful schooling in the Bible and “Christian Evidences.” Committed to old-fashioned pedagogy and religious fundamentalism, the college, though Parrington was grateful for it and even quite happy under its regime, gave next to nothing in the way of intellectual stimulation. It was, he recalled, “a sterile world,” closed to ideas, in which the teachers were “zealous to keep us from all new and unorthodox views.” His real education in these years seems to have been largely self-conducted. A voracious reader, he found himself at last in the presence of a city library with resources commensurate with his appetite, and he plunged vigorously into a course of self-directed reading in which the Victorian novel loomed large. His intellectual promise seems to have impressed his parents, for after three years of Emporia College they strained their resources to send him to Harvard, where he spent two more years and graduated, along with Oswald Garrison Villard and William Vaughn Moody, in the class of 1893.

At best Parrington’s Harvard experience can be characterized only as a provocative disaster. In the 1890’s Harvard was still an educational outpost of proper Boston, and although it did have a certain receptivity to bright young men from outside its sphere, it expected them to knock at its doors and wait. Some did; Bernard Berenson, less than ten years out of the Polish Pale, had made his way in, and so had others. But some combination of pride and vulnerability seems to have made it impossible for Parrington to make the necessary overtures, and he never recovered from his feeling of being an outsider. “An inferiority complex,” he later wrote—of Howells, whose problem in this respect was much less acute than his own—“is a common mark of the frontier mind that finds itself diffident in the presence of the old and established.” He had encountered, he thought, a degree of snobbery totally unfamiliar in Americus or Emporia, and he linked this snobbery

9 Howells himself offers some insight into the situation of the "jay," the unchuckleable outsider at Harvard, in his novel, The Landlord at Lion's Head (1897).
to the wealth of State Street that lay behind the university. “I could have made friends had I tried,” he later observed, “but I didn’t try, being as proud and independent as I was poor.” Although he studied with a few adequate instructors—among them Barrett Wendell (whose literary history would so often be contrasted with his) and George Herbert Palmer whose instruction in philosophy he thought first-rate—he seems to have received little more from the classroom than he did from the social or intellectual life of the undergraduates, and once again, as in Emporia, his education became in large part a matter of lonely reading, now in the Harvard library. A barely controlled resentment of Harvard and of the Brahmin culture it served lingered in his mind and occasionally broke through the surface of his history. On the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of his class in 1918, Parrington wrote to the class secretary for the benefit of his classmates: “The past five years I have spent in study and writing, up to my ears in the economic interpretation of American history and literature, getting the last lingering Harvard prejudices out of my system,” a remark which seems to stray into the disingenuous in order to arrive at the provocative, since it is hard to see how Parrington could ever have acquired any Harvard prejudices. “I become more radical with each year,” Parrington continued, “and more impatient with the smug Tory culture which we were fed on as undergraduates. I haven’t been in Cambridge since July, 1893. Harvard is only a dim memory to me. Very likely I am wrong in my judgment, yet from what little information comes through to me I have set the school down as a liability rather than an asset to the cause of democracy. It seems to me the apologist and advocate of capitalistic exploitation—as witness the sweet-smelling list of nominees set out yearly for the Board of Overseers.”

1 Secretary’s Sixth Report, Harvard College Class of 1893 (1918), 220–1. In his letter for the report of 1919, Parrington retrenched a little, since he appears to have recognized that in this age of conformity Harvard was sending out more than its share of critical young intellectuals. Of his own vintage, he singled out Oswald Garrison Villard: “He is the only member of our class whom I really envy. What a gorgeous time he must have, laying on at every smug and shoddy respectability that crosses his path.”

PART IV: V. L. Parrington

The mark of Parrington’s Harvard experience is evident in his treatment of Puritan and Brahmin culture. Two generations of Harvard scholarship, he remarked in the course of some biting observations on Kenneth Murdock’s study of Increase Mather, had covered the traces of the Mathers with apologetics because “a consciousness of dealing with Harvard worthies would seem to have laid the writers under certain inhibitions.” He blamed Harvard for what he considered the moral downfall of Lowell: Parrington speaks of “the dun professorial period of his life, when Harvard laid hands on him and came near to reducing him to its own ways,” and conjectures that Lowell’s dislike of Thoreau might have been “prodced by the consciousness that Thoreau had refused to make terms with Harvard culture as he had done.” In writing of the Gilded Age, Parrington protested against New England’s “cultural dictatorship over American letters,” charged that “New England parochialism had become a nation-wide nuisance,” and felicitated Hamlin Garland for having had the good fortune to enroll at the Boston Public Library instead of Harvard. “Only a New England historian,” he thought, could write as naïvely as John Fiske on the town meeting as the source of American democracy, and he took an unmistakable pleasure in contemplating the abolitionist Wendell Phillips’s last memorable encounter with Harvard when Phillips tactlessly read out a list of the movements of humanitarian reform to which Harvard had contributed nothing. Harvard was but one, in some ways the most objectionable, of a bad breed. Parrington had good reason not to be enamored of the academy in America, and believed, as he remarked in another connection, that “provocative thinking and the American university seem never to have got on well together.” It is tempting to speculate how much better served he might have been at one of the good state universities—to imagine, for example, that he might have gone, like Carl

In an undated letter plainly of his later years Parrington admitted to mixed feelings. “I suppose I love Harvard too, and as we are usually the nastiest to those we love best. I prove my affection by speaking somewhat despitfully of Harvard’s ways.” But his operative injunction about Harvard was firm: his son was not to go there.

2 1, 98; 465, 465–6; III, 53–3, 124, 146, 211, 292.
Becker, another Kansan, to study at Wisconsin, and might have come, as Becker did, under the influence of Frederick Jackson Turner. But for Kansans out of New England, Harvard seemed the obvious place to send a son.

Parrington's isolation at Harvard underlines a significant quality in his education. It might be taken as pejorative and would be literally inaccurate, after his five years of instruction at the collegiate level and his Harvard B.A., to say that Parrington was an autodidact. But he was left closer to the autodidact's condition and feeling about learning than one might infer from his Harvard degree. The College of Emporia had offered him the bare drill-master's fare of the old-time church-dominated small-town college, and what stimulation Harvard had to offer, in the era of James and Royce, he had largely missed. What he got from Harvard, in the main, was a feeling for pedagogy. Harvard had led the way in developing the elective system and in surmounting the curse of the old-fashioned classroom recitation, and Parrington picked up certain cues there—particularly, he acknowledged, from Barrett Wendell and Lewis Gates in English—which helped make him an outstandingly successful university teacher. Still, it does seem true that he never developed a close relationship with any leading teacher who could take an interest in the development of his mind or help him break down his native shyness. Parrington was self-educated to a degree beyond the conventional sense in which this must be said of every educated man. What he knew he learned mainly from his enthusiastic and self-directed reading, first in the library at Emporia and then at Harvard, and this set a pattern he was to follow the rest of his life. When one compares Parrington's experience in this respect with that of Beard, who went from the heady classes of Colonel Weaver at DePauw to Frederick York Powell at Oxford and then back to study with the urbane and distinguished graduate faculty at Columbia, or with that of Turner, who was so fortunate as to find W. F. Allen at Wisconsin and then to go on to Johns Hopkins at the moment when it had the most effective graduate school in the country, Parrington can be seen

as one of the most underprivileged of our famous academic men, a veritable waif of scholarship; and one gets a keen sense of the lonely courage and the dogged will that sustained him during his long years in the Siberian outposts of academic life before he finally arrived at the University of Washington. But if he appears also as an original, a kind of direct, native, self-made writer, one begins to understand certain of his qualities: his resentment of heartless establishments and the intellectuals who flourish in them, his love of the grand and difficult terms of criticism, his aspiration to cover in almost encyclopedic fashion such a great range of American literature, his formal and self-conscious style.

Intellectually, perhaps the most important consequence of his Harvard years was the secularization of Parrington's mind. At the College of Emporia, where evolution was still taboo, he had not rebelled against the prevailing doctrines. (His first recorded essay was an entry in an oratorical competition entitled "God in History."

But during his long hours of independent reading in the Harvard library, he began to feel the fascination of contemporary writers on evolution. Henry Drummond, the author of The Ascent of Man and a famous popular reconciler of evolution and religion, became his "chief guide," and he was soon led on to Herbert Spencer, particularly to his Data of Ethics, "the first book of Victorian speculation to make a deep impression on me." Under these influences the orthodoxy inculcated at Emporia began to crumble, and when Parrington returned to join the faculty of his college it was as a dissenter (presumably a secret dissenter with such secret discomforts as we can only guess at) from its most cherished assumptions.

At twenty-two Parrington was engaged by Emporia College, at a salary of $500, to teach English and French—a position he readily accepted because it was the only one available and he wanted to be near home. As yet he had no vocation for teaching. His father had wanted him to enter teaching and,
as he said, he “drifted into it”; but it soon appears to have commanded his earnest interest, since we find him promptly, but tactfully, pressing for more English courses in the curricula of American colleges. He was probably fortunate to have a job, for the stark depression of 1893 was about to begin. Since his father’s term as a probate judge had now expired, the Parringtons shared in the general insecurity, and the family was dependent upon his pension and the income from the farm. Things had not been good for the farmers for several years past, but now, as the price of corn fell to little more than twenty cents a bushel, the condition of many of them became desperate. Long afterward, recalling the stress of these years, Parrington remembered warming himself “by the kitchen stove in which great ears were burning briskly, popping and crackling in the jolliest fashion. And if while we sat around such a fire watching the year’s crop go up the chimney, the talk sometimes became bitter about railroads and middlemen, who will wonder? We were in a fitting mood to respond to Mary Ellen Lease and her doctrine of raising less corn and more hell.”

The Populist movement began to gain ground, and in Parrington’s mind the significance of the Western scene that he had known since boyhood became clear. The Republican party, so long the enthusiasm of his father, he now began to see as an organization of grafters, men who had waved the bloody shirt and talked patriotism “while the . . . politicians were making off with the spoils.” A new feeling about his family’s experience on the farm began to awaken in him and, as he later wrote, he saw his family’s role as essentially that of frontiersmen, with whom he was proud to identify himself. “In the most receptive years of my life I came under the influence of what, we are coming to see, proved to be the master force in creating the ideals which are most deeply and natively American—the influence of the frontier with its democratic sympathies and democratic economics. From that influence I have never been able to escape, nor have I wished to escape. To it and to the spirit of agrarian revolt that grew out of it, I owe much of my understanding of American history and

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**PART IV: V. L. Parrington**

much of my political philosophy.” The times reawakened Parrington’s lively sense of injustice. Any resident of a Western town like Emporia might number among his friends several old farmers who, at the end of a virtuous life of hard work and trial, had nothing to show for it, and at the same time might know one or two mean and grasping local bankers or tradesmen whose unrelinquished power and comfortable situation in the midst of the general distress seemed enviable and hateful. Such a man was Major Calvin Hood of the Emporia National Bank, who was vividly described by William Allen White, a domineering figure with his “hard, cruel mouth, rapacious and hungry,” his seemingly endless resources, and his tight web of influence controlling from one center the spheres of politics, business, the church, and, of course, the local college, where a radical young instructor might quickly come to his attention. Generous to his friends, ruthless to his enemies, Hood, as White put it, was, in little, the perfect surrogate and symbol of the world of concentrated power that lay outside the sphere of Emporia and Americus; he was Jim Hill, Jay Gould, Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller—and, for the radicals swinging into the orbit of the Populist movement, his presence put the reality of flesh and bile into abstract resentments. In his own mind Parrington could draw the contrast between his family’s friend, Old Pa Cook, an honest farmer who worked sixteen hours a day and died at seventy, a failure, and Major Hood, “a mean, small, grasping soul, who never missed a Sunday morning sermon or failed to skin a neighbor on Monday. . . . As a boy I hated Major Hood unreasonably; as a young man I hated him because he tried to put pressure on me when I turned Populist.” And so, under the stress of the nineties, Parrington forsook the political orthodoxy of Republicanism as he had forsaken the doctrinal orthodoxies of Emporia College.

Parrington did not turn Populist overnight, and he did not, as has commonly been said, run for a minor office on the Populist ticket, but his latent rebelliousness was brought to

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4 *College Life*, October 30, 1893.

5 White, Autobiography (1946), 263, 266-8, 353, 447.

6 Parrington did run in the spring of 1897 for a school board position on the Citizen’s ticket, and was not surprised or disappointed by his defeat. I do not know to what extent the Citizen’s ticket was a Populist creation.
life. His first impulse, he recalled, "was to dismiss the [Populist] leaders as a lot of farmer cranks." But in the depths of his mind were "old grievances that still rankled" and the new agrarian radicalism began to make sense to him. "I gave increased attention to the agrarian proposals, gaining thereby my first real insight into economics and political science. I was convinced then—and I have never seen any cause to doubt my conclusions—that the Populists were fighting the battle of democracy against an insolent plutocracy, defending the traditional American principles against a feudal industrialism." He began now to "hate the Republican party with its sordid and corrupt Mark Hannas, because it had sold itself to big business; and I came to hate big business because of its brutal hoggishness." In 1896 Parrington voted for Bryan. William Allen White, who had known Parrington and his brother John at the College of Emporia, later recalled arguing with the young instructor over the merits of the Bryan campaign. Unpersuaded, White went on to write his famous sally against agrarian radicalism, "What's the Matter with Kansas?" but years afterward concluded that Parrington had been right: "He knew the eternal justice of it. He was right and I was wrong. He just had a better brain than I, that was all." By 1897 Parrington, previously aloof about politics, attended a Kansas Populist convention as chairman of Emporia's First Ward delegation. He was also writing cautious but politically engaged essays for the college paper, appealing for the interest of educated men in affairs of state, attacking government by businessmen, invoking the social criticism of Ruskin and Morris.8

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7 Walter Johnson, William Allen White's America (1947), 91. Parrington's recollections were similarly cordial. Despite White's famous editorial, he wrote in 1928: "An Emporia editor would have been in hot water if he had turned Populist... . During that campaign I was inclined to Populism—as I still am—and I felt that Will had also in him the makings of a Populist." To Paul W. Partridge, October 6, 1928.

8 "Some Political Sketches," College Life, April 17, 24, May 1, 25, 1897. Parrington's "sketches," which were written under the eye of the senior members of the college faculty, and also, perhaps, under the eye of Major Hood, hardly preached straight Populist gospel, though there may have been an element of scepion communication in them. Parrington began by complaining that educated men take too little interest in affairs of state and by suggesting that this might be an increasingly serious matter in an age when grave new problems—among them the question "how far shall men born naked into the world be saddled by the product of past toil stored up in the form of capital?"—must be met. The ideal lawmaker for the republic was not the businessman. The strong have always taken good care of themselves, and wealth is arrogant; the impulses that make the good businessman are not good for the affairs of state. Unfortunately, however, men of culture, trained in the universities, did not provide an ideal alternative; they had not been in the habit of taking a leading part in public affairs, and had not shown themselves to be practical, although they had a valuable knowledge of history and political economy. Parrington vested his hopes in a third type of man—in which it is not hard to see a prototype of those "idealists" who win his approval in Main Currents: public leaders who have "sympathy for men," and who place human rights above the rights of property. But such leaders would need broad ideas about public policy, which, he suggested, they would be able to get from the university. In these essays one can see the Mugwump ideal of disinterested civic dedication, modified by a touch of Populist social idealism and a dawning respect for expertise—in short, a moderate and fairly representative statement of the themes which were to become dominant in the thought of the Progressive era.
that he also act as athletic director, manager, trainer, referee, and publicity writer. "Everything Parrington touched he seemed to vitalize," wrote a later annalist of Oklahoma football. Introducing the powerful cross-blocking he had seen at Harvard, Parrington developed a strong winning team; but after three years of exhausting success he asked to be relieved of his coaching duties. In the meantime he had been responsible for the organization of the tiny English Department. The catalogue of 1906 shows that it still had only three members, and that Parrington not only joined the other two in teaching English composition but had sole responsibility for advanced composition but that in various years he offered as well: English literature from Spenser to Pope, English literature from Johnson to William Morris, two courses in Shakespeare, a course on Tennyson and Browning, one on Ruskin and Morris, others on the novel in the eighteenth century, the novel in the nineteenth century, and the French Revolution in English poetry.

In the evenings, often at first after long afternoons on the gridiron, he wrote verse, some of which he published in the newspapers. In 1901 he married Julia Williams, a young woman of cultivated New York background who had come to Norman with her family from Kansas City, Missouri; and for fourteen months in 1903–4, while his patient bride waited at home because they were too poor for both of them to go, he made a grand tour of England and France, marked by prolonged reading spells in the British Museum and the Bibliothèque Nationale, and by careful and elaborate studies of English gardens. (A few years afterward, in a disastrous campus fire, all his notes from this venture were destroyed, along with the manuscript of a novel he had begun.) He appears to have won the regard of the university's president, who commissioned him in 1907 to prepare a report, in aid of their building program, on styles in contemporary college architecture in the United States. Parrington surveyed various existing plans and submitted a neatly designed version of a new campus. "Personally," he observed in a characteristic note, "I feel that we talk too much about a big university and too little about a beautiful university. To prefer the utilitarian

and to assume that the utilitarian must necessarily be ugly, and conversely that the beautiful is useless and therefore effeminate, is one of our national heresies."

At the end of his long spell of generous service, Parrington lost his job in what must surely be one of the most scandalous episodes in American academic history—and one which may help us to comprehend his impatient view of America's Puritan heritage. Oklahoma, which had been in the most rudimentary stage of its territorial development when Parrington went there, became a state in 1907, with serious consequences for the state university. The new governor, a Bryan Democrat, was catering to the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, some of whose leaders were engaged in a cabal against a large part of the faculty. Their purpose was clearly to get rid of its Yankee members educated at Eastern universities and to replace them with a more congenial faculty, including a healthy portion of coreligionists. After a brief but strident crusade against professors who smoked, danced, or played cards, the Christian reformers had their way, and the president and fourteen members of the faculty, including Parrington, were summarily fired. (Among them was the head of the department of philosophy, who was replaced by an eighth-grade teacher from the Tulsa school system.) Parrington's personal ways were what might have been called wholesome, even by Southern Methodist standards: he did not drink or play cards, and he cared little for dancing, though he might have been one of the "cigarette fiends" who aroused the indignation of one of the insurgent pastors. He fought hard for his job, and collected letters of testimony to his character and his usefulness that were both touching and impressive, but his assiduous efforts were futile. Only a few months after moving into a new house designed by himself (after the Elizabethan cottage), and partly built by his own labors, he was jobless and without resources. Even a portion of the salary owed to him was never collected. For a moment he thought of returning to Harvard—Harvard again, after all—to work for a one-year doctorate. He wrote a long, careful letter to the secretary of the graduate school, appealing for aid and explaining his desire to study the influence of the
Renaissance on English prose, to compare changes in prose with the development of English architecture, and also to compare what he called "English-colonial literature"—that is, American, Canadian, and Australian writing—with English writing. But Harvard, which had done little enough for him earlier, when it was feasible, must have looked askance at such an imaginative but impracticable suggestion from a man of thirty-seven who had already been teaching for fifteen years, and, understandably, he was rejected once again. Fortunately, Parrington found a job at once at the University of Washington at a salary of $1,500, slightly lower than at Oklahoma. The change proved much to his advantage; both the physical and the social climate at Seattle were congenial, and there Parrington found warm colleagues in political science and history, like J. Allen Smith, and Joseph B. Harrison, and later younger men in his own field, among them E. H. Eby, who was to write the introduction to his posthumous third volume. Above all he found himself at last living in an environment of great natural beauty.

In this heartening new life the political man in Parrington began to take on more coherent intellectual form. All that had shaped his radical sentiments—the radical legacy of his English grandfather, the social resentments of his Harvard period, the protest spirit of the Populist 1890's, the long years of academic service under the surveillance of fundamentalists and tenth-rate politicians—began to come into focus in a more systematic, rather militant view of literature and politics. When he left Norman, as he remembered, "the economic interpretation of history had not yet risen for me, but it lay just below the horizon and was soon to become the chief luminary in my intellectual sky. My new interest in American literature opened a fresh field for me and in that field I applied the economic interpretation more and more rigidly."

In the encouraging companionship of academics of some distinction, Parrington began to gain confidence in himself and to develop new interests. He had never taught American literature, but now it began to absorb him, and he plunged into it with the fresh energy of a novice. Around 1910, he began to think of a big book on American letters, and in 1913 he started work on it in earnest. Until the eve of publication, when his publishers suggested a change, he intended to call it The Democratic Spirit in American Literature: 1860–1870—a title that proclaimed his selective and limited intentions and might perhaps have helped, if he had kept it, to soften some of the criticism he was to receive. As an epigraph for the work, he once planned to use a few words of Carl Becker's he had copied from The Dial: "The business of history is to arouse an intelligent discontent, to foster a fruitful radicalism." The Progressive era was in full swing. Everyone was talking, during the formative years of this book, of the new democracy and the new freedom. And indeed in this country, with its long history of democratic aspiration, why should there not be a grand history of thought and letters celebrating the democratic theme? Why should not someone, at last, use the history of letters to illuminate national life and thought, and discuss literature, in the tradition of Sainte-Beuve and Taine, as an index of a civilization? Like his predecessors, Parrington planned to view literature through biographical-critical sketches, but now the biographies would serve as the connectives between the themes of literature and the motives of society.

Neither the entire boldness of Parrington's undertaking, nor its importance as a stimulus, nor the enthusiasm with which it was greeted, nor its final eclipse, can be understood unless we recall the state of scholarship in American literary history and the history of ideas, as well as the state of criticism, at the time he did his work. In the years from 1913 to 1927 a few American scholars, including some of the Europeanists and the philosopher A. O. Lovejoy, were writing sophisticated and distinguished studies in the general history of ideas; but among those who worked in American history, this field had excited scant interest. Parrington had only two predecessors of note, both able, self-taught amateurs of scholarship, Edward Eggleston and Moses Coit Tyler, a novelist and a Congregational pastor. Neither had won adequate recognition, nor had they succeeded in founding a scholarly tradi-

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tion of work in the history of ideas, though both Beard and Becker had taken some steps in this direction. There was in fact so little regard for this kind of history, as history, that Main Currents, even though it received the Pulitzer Prize in the field, was not at first taken by most historians to be a historical work, and (except for an obscure magazine in Parrington's own state) was not reviewed by the professional historical quarters.

A whole shelfful of comprehensive histories of American literature had accumulated by 1927, most of them stereotyped, uncritical, textbookish, and, in one way or another, parochial. In a noted essay of 1924, "A Call for a Literary Historian," Professor Fred Lewis Pattee complained that these works were so uniform that he could dictate one to a stenographer in three days. College teachers of American literature were still fighting for the legitimacy of their subject, which was looked upon with disdain by most departments of English. American literature was not usually an important part of the undergraduate curriculum, and in many colleges it was not taught at all. Even graduate work in the subject was extremely limited. Harvard, Parrington's unloved alma mater, one of the largest and best graduate schools in the country, located at the geographical heart of American literary culture, had sponsored only negligible research in the field: of all the PhD theses presented to the English Department down to 1926, only four dealt with North America, and one of these was on Canadian literature. Until 1929 there was no learned periodical given entirely to studies in American literature. Specialized studies were still rare, and sound modern biographies of many of the figures Parrington wrote about (including the central figure of Jefferson himself) were not to be had. He knew very well that he was venturing again and again upon untrod ground. "The inadequacies of the present study," he wrote modestly, "I am painfully conscious of: its omissions, its doubtful interpretations, its hasty generalizations, its downright guesses; but in the present lack of exact knowledge of the history of American letters, I do not see how such in-

2 II. x. Parrington was intensely conscious of the rudimentary state of American literary study. "Pretty much everything is yet to be done in the field of the History of American Literature," he wrote in 1924, though five years later he remarked with satisfaction that "the study of American Literature is becoming respectable." To Elias T. Arnesen, November 17, 1924; to George E. Hastings, March 7, 1929.

3 On this tendency in Parrington, see Chapter 12, 408 ff. One may wonder, for example, if Parrington's treatment of James (see below, 394) might not have been given some encouragement from the following by Brooks (The Pilgrimage of Henry James): "Magnificent pretensions, petty performances!—the fruits of an irresponsible imagination, of a deranged sense of values, of a mind working in a void, uncorrected by any clear consciousness of human cause and effect."
ing, Cleanth Brooks—men without whose collective achievement our present sense of literature and the function of criticism would be impoverished and unrecognizable, had not yet begun to publish criticism. In most cases, their earliest important critical writings came roughly in the years 1930–40, during which the premises of literary evaluation, as well as the national feeling about literature, were undergoing rapid change. At the very time when readers were becoming acquainted with Parrington's volumes, therefore, a new set of receptivities, a new sensibility belonging to another moment than his own, were in the process of formation. His volumes, published only at the end of his life, had been conceived in a quite different literary world from that into which they were launched, and the ground under his feet shifted almost immediately. It is a comment on the function of Main Currents that, appearing as it did at such a focal moment in the development of American letters, of criticism and literary knowledge, and belonging as it did so much more to the past than to the future, it was still able for a time to strike so congenial a note with many intelligent readers, and that by the force of its provocation it could exercise quite so much effect.

Here too one must be impressed by the solitary courage, the discipline, the sustained determination of this professor of English as he carried on in obscurity, and despite the handicap of an underequipped and inadequate library, with this improbable enterprise, the likes of which no one had ever undertaken for American literature—a comprehensive history of national letters from the Puritans to the most recent past, which, even in the unfinished form in which he left it after labors of sixteen years, and ten years of discouraging rebuffs from publishers, came to three volumes and more than 1,500 pages. At the time Parrington began it, he was almost totally unknown, and had published little besides a few verses in the daily press, and at the time he finished it he had added to these only about a dozen book reviews and a few articles. Seen against this background, Parrington, with his singular vision of his task, his undismayed persistence, and his isolated and unpracticed energy, appears to be less a typical product of the academy than a phenomenon of natural talent, another of those lonely American originals who are made to seem somewhat overstrained and bizarre by their excessively firm grip on some too limited segment of the truth, and who finally succeed not in giving us the grand revelation they have hoped to find, but at least in telling something about themselves, and hence something native and vital about America after all.

III

The sources of Parrington's ideas are not entirely clear, but we can see how the sense of literature expressed in Main Currents has its cognates in the views of art and reality that run through some other writers of the Populist-Progressive era. Here it is important not to be oversystematic. Parrington was no esthetician. He was only slightly more interested in formal philosophy than he was in theology or science, and it would be as wrong to attribute to him a finished or consistent esthetic doctrine as it would be to expect one from him. But if we are willing to deal with a tendency of mind, a general drift of sensibility, rather than to hope to find identities of taste or judgment, it becomes possible to find his place in the stream of literary thought and to mark out his affinities with certain other writers, no two of whom were entirely alike in their approach to art and no one of whom he approved unreservedly.

Parrington proclaimed his indebtedness to Hippolyte Taine, whose four-volume History of English Literature (1864) had appeared in translation in England in 1874 and was reissued in the United States in 1886. For a time Taine enjoyed a certain regard among many critics in the United States, including some of the most genteel and conservative, but his mind belonged rather more to the post-Darwinian positivistic climate than to the era in which Parrington began to write. For Taine literary history was not self-sufficient but had somehow to be made amenable to the methods of science. This was his chief link to Americans like Parrington, but perhaps also a reason for the ephemeral character of his influence. His approach to literary history might well have been expected to excite a generation that found intellectual enlight-
enment and liberation in Herbert Spencer—precisely the experience of Parrington and Hamlin Garland. His leading idea—that all forces behind literary movements can be reduced to the interplay of race, milieu, and moment—would not be taken very seriously for very long; but Taine did set a kind of precedent for later writers who were concerned to establish the idea that literature is largely a product of society, that a work of literature is a social document amenable to the methods of the social historian. I suspect that Parrington's obligation to Taine did not go much beyond this, though it is quite possible that it was in Taine that he first happened to encounter a model for a biographical approach to literature—a grand, comprehensive literary history, organized in a series of compressed discussions of leading writers and their works. When he actually discusses English writers, Taine does not seem the terrible simplificateur that a bare statement of his "theory" may suggest. His mind was, though more positivistic, less sociological than Parrington's, his concern with intrinsic literary values greater, his range of interests wider, his attention more closely directed to the work of art itself. He was much more interested than Parrington in literature as an aid to national characterization—"race"—much less in the phenomena of politics and class. Taine himself, in fact, was almost antipolitical, but the kind of literary history he encouraged tended to substitute biography for criticism, the man for the work. Flaubert had complained of Taine and Sainte-Beuve that they did not pay enough attention to the work of art in itself, to "composition, style, briefly what makes for Beauty." Turning away from the literary text itself, and from the task of criticism, the literary history written in this tradition was disposed to use the literary work to elucidate the man.

4 Garland tells of his first encounter with Taine one summer in a cabin in the Dakotas: "Day after day I bent to this task, pondering all the great Frenchman had to say of race, environment, and momentum (sic) and on the walls of the cabin I mapped out in chalk the various periods of English society as he had indicated them. These charts were the wonder and astonishment of my neighbors whenever they chanced to enter the living room, and they appeared especially interested in the names written on the ceiling over my bed. I had put my favorites there so that when I opened my eyes of a morning, I could not help absorbing a knowledge of their dates and works." A Son of the Middle Border, 307.

PART IV: V. L. Parrington which was its primary object. And in Parrington's own variation, the elucidation of the man became first and foremost the elucidation of his civic role and his political ideas.

Considerably more important for Parrington than Taine was the Victorian tradition of moral-esthetic criticism represented by Carlyle, Ruskin, and Morris; among these it was Morris who was most significant. In Morris, Parrington found a socialist who had a coherent theory of art, and who shared Parrington's wariness of the threat of concentrated state power. Here was a writer of authority who recognized fully the interplay between art and social forces, but whose esthetic passion put him above the charge of subordinating art to propagandistic intent, a writer who could explain how commercial society was damaging and destructive to art, who developed a democratic esthetic of uncompromising egalitarianism in which the true roots of art are seen to be in the joyous labor of the ordinary man. At the moment, Parrington recalled in his memoir, when the rising flame of radicalism in him needed only a little fuel, "William Morris came bringing that fuel. In lovely prose with its suggestion of mediaeval beauty, he laid bare the evils of industrialism; how it was destroying art and bringing upon society the blight of universal ugliness; how it reduced the free artist workman to a machine slave; how it took away the chance of happiness in one's work and therefore in one's life; and how before art should be born again men must be free to do their work in their own way." The one vital principle that Parrington could not in the end bring himself to accept, however it might accord with his agrarian prejudices and his dislike of political centralization, was the anti-industrial side of Morris's thought. Although in writing of Bellamy he noted that Morris had spoken of Looking Backward as "a horrible cockney dream," he concluded that "Bellamy was far more modern and realistic in his understanding of the part the machine will play in the society of the future." 25

By the time he began his book, Parrington's ideas were largely formed. In reading he had paid close attention to the struggles of certain of his contemporaries who were involved

5 III, 237, 311-12.
in the development of realism and naturalism and the novel of social criticism. Among these were William Dean Howells, whom he treated more sympathetically than did most of the writers of the 1920’s; Hamlin Garland, whose personal and intellectual experience bears a closer resemblance to Parrington’s than that of any other imaginative writer; and Frank Norris, whose Responsibilities of the Novelist Parrington found “boldly, magnificently” stated, even if colored by the writer’s “immense faith in the finality of his own conclusions.” These were, again, writers who shared certain very broad tendencies, without having precisely the same sensibilities or theories of literature. But what Parrington found sympathetic in them—the point at which they confirmed the drift of his own mind—seems reasonably clear. They quickened his belief, a belief for which he had already found Taine congenial, that art is a product of its social milieu, and that literature can therefore become a means of studying society, as well as the conviction he had found in the Victorian cultural critics that art and life should serve each other, that art has moral responsibilities which in the final analysis are social responsibilities. They confirmed in him a disposition to believe in the central importance of what he would have called “reality”—in the feeling that that which is observed has some kind of superiority to that which is merely imagined. Further, they suggested at times that form and style can to a significant degree be dissociated from the matter or substance of art, and that matter is more important—by the same token that an excessive preoccupation with style or nuances or with distinctively individual concerns is superficial, effete, unworldly, “romantic,” as compared with a robust engagement with the real, the material, the sociological.

Howells, Parrington suggested in a revealing sentence, “came late to an interest in sociology, held back by the strong literary and aesthetic cast of his mind.” The assumption here of a powerful opposition between the social and the aesthetic sense is characteristic. Here one finds, and not surprisingly, a parallel between Parrington’s approach to literature and Beard’s to politics—above all in their common conviction that there is some hard core to history, some basic substance, and that ideas and literature, all phases of culture, are somehow secondary to it or derivative from it. Finally, and of particular importance, early realist writers seem to share the uncomfortable feeling that there is probably some kind of tension or opposition between truth and beauty that must, as far as is possible, be overcome or reconciled by strenuous devices; but that if there is at the end any irreducible conflict between them, it is truth that is the ultimate end of art. The opposition between truth and beauty was their way of expressing that dichotomy between content and form which their esthetic was incapable of surmounting. Truth, at any rate, was the key word for them, and they kept calling for truth in art as if they really expected some compatriot to step forward and take a firm stand for falsehood.

Howells tried to persuade them that when the matter was rightly understood, this opposition between truth and beauty did not exist. “What is unpretentious and what is true is always beautiful and good, and nothing else is so.” “Realism is nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material.” “We must ask ourselves before we ask anything else, Is it true?—true to the motives, the impulses, the principles, that shape the life of actual men and women?” But some of the difficulties of all this began to appear when he also wrote: “There is no greatness, no beauty, which does not come from truth to your own knowledge of things”—a passage which only hints at the problems that arise from the fact that the artist perceives truth at a variety of levels and proceeds in a variety of ways to express it.  

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6 Howells, Criticism and Fiction and Other Essays, ed. by Clara M. and Rudolf Kirk (1959), 10, 38, 49, 69; italics added.

Early American realistic and naturalistic writers were so embattled in behalf of verisimilitude that most of what was implied in this involuntary concession by Howells seems to have escaped them. Truth to a writer’s “own knowledge of things” covers a great many ways of fiction. No doubt, for example, the stylized novels of Ivy Compton-Burnett try to state “truths” about English society, but these are surely of a different order and differently conveyed than the truths stated by Arnold Bennett. In America, again, the truth about the small town (to choose two authors Parrington appreciated) in Sherwood Anderson is another thing from the truth as seen by Sinclair Lewis. Even in social science this principle sometimes applies: the American scene as understood by Thorstein Veblen has more in common with the human scene as understood by Jonathan Swift than it does with the American scene portrayed in Robert H. and Helen M. Lynd’s

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PART IV: V. L. Parrington
It was the responsibility of the novelist, Frank Norris urged, to give people the truth: "The people have a right to the Truth as they have a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It is not right that they be deceived with false views of life. . . ." And in a passage quoted with some reservation by Parrington, Garland recalled the resolution of his own sense of the proper view of literature: "Obscurely forming in my mind were two great literary concepts—that truth was a higher quality than beauty, and that to spread the reign of justice should everywhere be the design and intent of the artist. The merely beautiful in art seemed petty, and success at the cost of the happiness of others a monstrous egotism." Parrington might well have been disturbed by the implications of this—as he put it in a puzzling remark, Garland's "will to remain objective weakened"—but Garland had posed in a rough way the problem of the Populist-Progres-
sive sense of literature, bringing to the surface the note of stern social moralism that accompanied its humane purposes.

A realistic, robust, masculine literature, it was thought, pointed away from estheticsm and aristocratic prejudice, and laid the mental and moral basis for democracy and social reform without involving the writer in the trap of mere tractarianism. By 1893 Howells had come to believe that "any conscientious and enlightened fiction" would somehow show the need for and the way to socialism. Any art, Howells had written in *Criticism and Fiction*, which "disdains the office of teacher is one of last refuges of the aristocratic spirit which is disappearing from politics and society and is now seeking to shelter itself in aesthetics. The pride of caste is becoming the pride of taste; but as before it is averse to the masses of men. . . . It seeks to withdraw itself, to stand aloof; to be distinguished, and not to be identified. Democracy in literature is the reverse of all this. It wishes to know and to tell the truth, confident that consolation and delight are there. . . .

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*books on Middletown. A work like C. Wright Mills's White Collar, though it purports to be in the tradition of empirical sociology, is in fact an expressionistic work voicing the author's horror at what goes on in large offices and at what he sees as the particular spiritual impoverishment of the salaried middle class.*

*Norris, The Responsibilities of the Novelist (originally published 1903) in Complete Works (1949), VII, 8–9; Garland, A Son of the Middle Border, 374.*

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Neither arts, nor letters, nor sciences, except as they somehow, clearly or obscurely, tend to make the race better and kinder, are to be regarded as serious interests. . . ." The real American muse, Norris had insisted, is a Child of the People; she will lead you, he had promised the novelists of the future, "far from the studios and the aesthetes, the velvet jackets and the uncut hair, far from sexless creatures who cultivate their little art of writing as the fancier cultivates his orchid. Tramping along, then, with a stride that will tax your best paces, she will lead you . . . straight into a world of Working Men, crude of speech, swift of action, strong of passion, straight to the heart of a new life, on the borders of a new time. . . ."

"The realist or veritist," said Hamlin Garland in *Crumbling Idols*, "is really an optimist, a dreamer. He sees life in terms of what it might be, as well as in terms of what it is; but he writes of what is, and, at his best, suggests what is to be, by contrast. . . . He sighs for a lovelier life. . . . With his hate in his heart and his ideal in his brain the modern man writes his stories of life. They are not always pleasant, but they are generally true, and always they provoke thought." The fiction of the future, he thought, "will grow more democratic in outlook and more individualistic in method."* Realism, truth, democracy, a new time, a lovelier life—these were key terms of art.

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One can readily trace similar concerns in Parrington's work. At some time during the years when the rising generation of realist and naturalist writers were having their first important successes, his hard-won, self-conscious, and rather brittle youthful estheticism appears to have snapped and to have given way to something that was very close to its opposite. I do not mean to suggest that he now became indifferent to the values of art, but that he became increasingly fearful that they were capable of standing in the way of
something more important: the values of social morality. It is true that he expressed quite clearly his doubt about the proposition that art must serve social morality, or, as he rather loosely put it, that “it must teach rather than amuse,” and it is easy to see why he took comfort in Morris not for preaching that art must serve social reform but rather for promising that social reform would engender a finer art. He was capable of reproaching several writers, including some he admired, for putting propaganda above art—of dismissing such books as Garland’s A Spoil of Office as being “a social tract rather than a work of art”—and he had a certain saving skepticism about young writers “enthusiastic for revolt as a profession.” Now and then, as in his estimation of Cabell, he appears even to have returned to the impulse evident in his youthful estheticism, and he was never at any time willing to defend the bald proposition that the values of art ought to be regarded as inferior to any social concern. Nonetheless, he was capable of treating particular works, or even the entire oeuvre of a particular writer, as though this proposition was his basic canon of criticism. He seemed to rule out whole areas of human experience, including some of the most tenderly personal and some of the most significantly universal, as being beneath the dignity of serious art and unworthy of the attention of serious writers. In this way, while he dismissed some books for having been propaganda rather than art, he also dismissed others, including those of Hawthorne and James, for not having the proper social concerns.

Parrington’s basic aim was to define a writer’s milieu, his style of life, his class affiliations, and finally his political ideas, especially insofar as these ideas had a bearing on the development of American democracy. Ultimately, Parrington’s judgments are moral, but his test of a writer’s morality is not the integrity of his mind in relation to his art but the breadth and warmth of his social sympathies and the appropriateness of his subject matter as defined by the canons of critical realism. Of some interest here is his view of Howells, a writer whom he treated more generously on the whole than most of the critics of the 1920’s and whose conversion to “socialism” he admired. Despite his regard for Howells’s human warmth, Parrington still thought, as many other critics have, that Howells’s concern for the commonplace weakened his work and rendered it trivial, that “it does not probe the depths of emotional experience.” But one begins to be shaken, on reading further, to find that he regards Howells as having been “a specialist in women’s nerves, an analyst of the tenuous New England conscience, a master of Boston small-talk,” and one is rather taken aback when he remarks concerning one of Howells’s better books, The Rise of Silas Lapham, that it fails “when endless pages are devoted to the ethical subtleties of a woman’s accepting the hand of a man who the family had believed was in love with her sister,” thus concentrating his disdain on one of the most successful moments in Howells’s writing. What business does a writer have, Parrington seems to ask, to occupy himself with such trifles? But perhaps nothing illustrates better for most critics the limitations of his view of literature than his two-page dismissal of Poe as a writer “quite outside the main current of American thought” and his leaving him, as he put it, “with the psychologist and the bellettrist.” Again, when he condemns Hawthorne for lacking the imagination of a healthy romantic because he did not rise to the romance of Salem’s trade, for neglecting “to lift his eyes to the horizon beyond which the hurrying ships were seeking strange markets,” and for turning them in “upon a shadowy world of half unreal character,” for overlooking “the motley picturesque in the foreground of the actual, in order to brood over an old adultery and twist it into theological sin,” we are prompted to wonder why he wrote at all about a figure like Hawthorne, whose literary pre-eminence may be arguable, but surely not on such grounds as this.

A certain rigidity was undoubtedly introduced into Parrington’s approach to literature at the very time that his political views were taking form. Here perhaps his intellectual association with J. Allen Smith was of some importance. Smith, eleven years Parrington’s senior, had been born in Missouri of Virginia emigrants, had studied law and had then turned to economics. Always a radical, he had pub-
lished a heretical doctoral thesis on monetary reform, *The Multiple Money Standard*, during the Bryan campaign, and had lost his job at Marietta College because of his political views. In 1897 he moved to the University of Washington, where before long he became active as a reformer in local politics and in 1912 declined an offer to run for governor on the Progressive ticket. It was in 1907 that he published his *The Spirit of American Government* about the undemocratic character of the Constitution and the undemocratic intentions of its framers—the book which, along with Beard’s, Parrington saw as constituting the primary contribution of Progressivism to political thought. A single-minded political reformer, Smith was not a friend likely to encourage Parrington’s regard for the autonomy of art. He was, as Cushing Strout describes him, “a man of limited cultivation” who “owned a library exclusively composed of works in the subjects he taught,” and who “had no taste for serious literature or music.” He was the true founder of that Progressive dualism I have already discussed in Chapter 5 in connection with the work of Beard, but he had none of Beard’s covert or suppressed Federalism, and shared none of Beard’s ambivalence about the Founding Fathers, of whose work he took a more unequivocally conspiratorial view. It was of course the similarity between the findings of the two men that struck Parrington; Beard’s book on the Constitution, appearing just at the time when he was settling down to concerted work on *Main Currents*, came as a complete confirmation and enlargement of what he had learned from Smith, and strengthened his ingrained suspicion of establishments and their spokesmen and manipulators.

During these years at Seattle it seemed very clear who were one’s friends and one’s enemies, and the discussion of literature became part of a social struggle, in which the theory and uses of literature were understood to be a weapon. Within the halls of the university itself Smith, with Parrington’s sympathy, was embattled, and Parrington himself experienced some tension with his own department. In 1917 Smith fell afoul of the university’s president, who was more

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1 Introduction to *The Spirit of American Government,* xxii.

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interested in developing a business school than in the study of pure economics and who drastically cut back Smith’s department, arbitrarily isolating and humiliating one of the most distinguished members of the faculty. At the same moment Parrington was incensed against his colleagues in the English department, who, in the time-honored manner of English faculties, took a dim view of American literature, its place in the curriculum, and even its demands on library funds. It was in the course of this controversy that Parrington prepared an essay, “Economics and Criticism” (1917), for a proposed volume of English department studies, which shows how far he had gone toward a rather stark economic interpretation of literature.

Assailing “the conservatism of scholarship,” Parrington took up the case for “the economist” in literature—the “upstart” inspired by rude materialism who digs into the dirt under the flower garden. “The economic interpretation of things is in the air,” he proclaimed. “... It is fast becoming for us both the law and the prophet.” The time has come when we are pulling the clothes off things and stripping them to “the naked reality.” “Literature is the fair flower of culture, but underneath culture are the deeper strata of philosophy, theology, law, statecraft—of ideology and institutionalism—resting finally upon the subsoil of economics. We may begin as critics but we end up as historians.” He was quite out of patience, he confessed, with the old-fashioned scholars, the classicists and philologists. Aristotle’s *Poetics* no longer had much help to give toward understanding the world, and there ought to be something more important to students of English literature than the Teutonic origins of the language. The humanists in literature were more attractive, but there was something vital missing in them. “Do they understand the origin and significance of those very ideas which they study so lovingly? Ideas are not godlings that spring perfec-
winged from the head of love; they are not flowers that bloom in a walled garden; they are weapons hammered out on the anvil of human needs." It is the economist—by which term it is clear that Parrington here means not the professional economist but the critic who applies economic insights to letters—who understands this best. The economist is "a humanist who has gone further and seen deeper." Although he cannot explain everything, he at least understands the "subtle compulsions" under which the artist works, and when we come to study the habitat of literature, the system of ideas and institutions in which the artist moves, the economist is truly master. "He has only to apply the familiar principles of the economic interpretation of history to his literary documents in order to measure in which degree they reflect the current ideology. He cuts under the feet of the humanist to the property basis of ideas and institutions. In every society, he discovers, property is sovereign." He penetrates through the veil of taste and convention. He may of course underestimate at times the force of ideas and ideals, but "that the mainspring of the struggle is the economic is plain as the way to parish church." In a passage reminiscent of Howells on "the pride of caste" converting itself into "the pride of taste," Parrington continued: "Polic culture is a translation of economics into caste terms. Good taste is no other than a by-product of property. Standards and canons of excellence, types and forms and conventions of art, are no more than the sublimation and embodiment of current aristocratic practice. How could it be otherwise?"

Having laid down these principles, Parrington went on at length to show how they might apply to English and American literature. Here it may be enough to repeat what he had to say about Shakespeare. Shakespeare (who is contrasted unfavorably with the hardy radical, Milton) turns out to be, on these canons, the product of a courtier society, a creature of the "insolent toryism, masterful and arrogant," that "stalked across the Elizabethan stage." "Shakespeare was the cleverest of climbers and necessarily he stood cap in hand in the presence of gentlemen. The dramatist of universal human nature, the poet of all time, was eager to assert his servility by befouling all underling human nature. His draft on posterity he readily sold for present favour. The Warwickshire peasant caught the insolent class consciousness of his patron.... Where in the ample pages of Shakespeare do we find the London of reality that was gathering its strength to pull down both court and courtier?.... He was more concerned to become the first citizen of Stratford than to hold the broadest realms of poesy in fee."

Have we ever heard anything like this before? In fact we have: it is very reminiscent of Mark Twain's reaction in Innocents Abroad to the "cringing spirit" of the great artists of the past when he first saw them in the museums of Europe: "Their nauseous adulation of princely patrons was more prominent to me and chained my attention more surely than the charms of color and expression which are claimed to be in the pictures." But for Parrington to have struck the same note seems all too much like self-caricature, and it may indeed be true that he began to have some misgivings about the way his case was put, since he did not attempt to publish this essay elsewhere when the planned collection of English department essays was abandoned. His essay

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4 Cf. also the later Tolstoy on Shakespeare: "The content of Shakespeare's plays... is the lowest, most vulgar view of life, which regards the external elevation of the great ones of the earth as a genuine superiority; despises the crowd, that is to say, the working classes; and repudiates not only religious, but even any humanitarian efforts directed toward the alteration of the existing order of society." Tolstoy on Art, ed. by Aylmer Maude (1924), 446.

5 His son, in publishing the essay after more than thirty-five years, remarked that it was uncharacteristically belligerent and doubted that Parrington thought it was a satisfactory statement of his "materialism." Economics and Criticism, 97. In the preface to his third volume, Parrington remarked: "I hold no brief for a rigid scheme of economic determinism. I recognize the rich culture potentialities that inhere in individual variation from type, and I realize that the arts are likely to receive their noblest gifts from men who should be classed biologically as cultural sports or variations from the cultural type." But in looking for the typical, these variations, he went on, were not significant for their own sake, and he saw nothing to regret in his treatment of Poe, III, xx-xxi.

Parrington was not the only American of his period to stumble over an economic approach to literature. In 1910, inspired by E. R. A. Seligman's The Economic Interpretation of History, Brandreth Matthews took as the subject of his Presidential Address to the Modern Language Association, "The Economic Interpretation of Literary History." The result was not distinguished. See Matthews, Cultivars to Literature, and Other Essays (1912), 35-56.
marks out, nonetheless, the hard core of feeling upon which the "economic interpretation of literature" rested, and rather rudely foreshadows the aggressive but inarticulate esthetic, the reductionist animus, that was to be the hallmark of the liberal historians.

Surely this quality was not Parrington's alone, but one widely shared in the tradition of Progressive history. Here Parrington and Beard, for example, seem to be kindred spirits. One of Parrington's happiest moments came from a review by Beard, in which the democratic realism of Parrington's first two volumes was greeted with cries of enthusiasm. Although Beard had some reservations about the book, chiefly for its neglect of natural science, he thought that Parrington had "revealed the substance from which literary culture springs" and had sent "exhilarating gusts through the deadly mist of academic criticism." Parrington, he suggested, "is about to start an upheaval in American literary criticism. He has yanked Miss Beautiful Letters out of the сфере of the higher verbal hokum and fairly set her in the way that leads to contact with pulsating reality—that source and inspiration of all magnificent literature. No doubt, the magpies, busy with the accidence of Horace, the classical allusions of Thoreau, and the use of the adverb by Emerson, will make a big outcry, but plain citizens who believe that the American eagle could soar with unblinking eyes against the full-orbed noonday sun if he had half a chance will clap their hands with joy and make the hills ring with gladness."

Perhaps one should close this disturbing chapter in the history of taste while the hills are still ringing, but it remains

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*Beard, "Fresh Air in American Letters," *Nation*, 124 (1927), 560, 564; oddly enough, Beard's review of Parrington appeared back to back with a review of the Beards' *Rise of American Civilization*, in which Carl Becker showed the same hearty enthusiasm and took a similar tone of jazz-age robustness. "It is often difficult," he said, "to recognize the ancient lady Clio, famous for her spotless flowing robes. She is off stage so much of the time! Her hair is bobbed, and you can see her bare knees if you care to look, for she rolls 'em too, and will in any company as like as not be seen tapping a cigarette or fumbling for a lip-stick. It's all right with me. What the lady loses in dignity she gains in appeal—sex maybe." Ibid., 560.

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*Main Currents*, III, 239-41; *Rise*, II, 441.

**PART IV: V. L. Parrington**

to suggest that these two writers were linked not simply in mutual approval, but upon a view of literature that could result at times in strikingly similar verdicts. One illustration may do. More or less at the same time, and of course writing in complete independence, Parrington and Beard were coming to terms with Henry James, the latter giving him a brusque paragraph in *The Rise of American Civilization*, the former a few pages in *Main Currents*. Both historians condemn James for what they regard as preciosity and aristocratic yearnings, and both are animated by the same democratic nationalism and outraged Americanism, the same hearty masculine impatience with refinement and esthetic truck. Beard had this to say:

"For the poignant middle class of seasoned families, equally distressed by the doings of the plutocrats and the vulgariosms of democracy, spoke Henry James. The grandson of a millionaire, a whole generation removed from the odors of the shop, and granted by good fortune a luxurious leisure, James steered his way into a more rarefied atmosphere, normally as the sparks fly heavenward. In a loftier altitude he found many superior people 'cultivated' in taste, languid in habits, and desirous of elegant manners if they had not fallen heir to them in a natural way. Of such upper class persons and for them, James wrote most of his novels, using the crude, rising bourgeoisie of America to emphasize the prettiness of the English landed aristocracy which had subdued even its latest cotton-spinning recruits to some accord with manorial taste. Possessing an assured income from fixed investments, he took time in his writing to evolve a meticulous and fine-spun style, one so vague and so intricate that it moved even his brother, William, the pragmatic philosopher, to explode in a letter to the novelist: 'Say it out, for God's sake.' Accustomed by his position to the society of people not wholly engrossed in business, James found a home in England, where at last, during the World War, he renounced his American citizenship and became a subject of King George."
In Parrington’s pages James turns up only a little less briefly and even more ignominiously. A man for whom “life was largely a matter of nerves,” James “fled from reality” and became “a pilgrim to shrines other than those of his native land,” a fatal mistake for his work, since it is unhealthy for the artist “to turn cosmopolitan.” The key to James was that he was never a realist but rather “a self-deceived romantic, the last subtle expression of the genteel,” oppressed by an “unconscious inferiority complex” before the long-established social order of Europe, a writer whose romanticization of European culture “worked to his undoing.” “From the external world of action he withdrew to the inner world of questioning and probing; yet even in his subtle psychological inquiries he remained shut up within his own skull-pan. His characters are only projections of his brooding fancy, externalizations of hypothetical subtleties. He was concerned only with nuances. He lived in a world of fine gradations and imperceptible shades. It is this absorption in the stream of psychical experience that justifies one in calling Henry James a forerunner of modern expressionism. Yet how unlike he is to Sherwood Anderson, an authentic product of the American consciousness!”

These passages, which expose the vulnerable underside of the environmental approach to literature, reveal both men at their worst, writing about a major writer in whom their interest was relatively casual, and about whom they could not command enough detachment even to see the necessity of being fair. But they also raise a question that has from time to time haunted radical criticism, especially in America: how does one preserve that tincture of rage, that energetic indignation which makes social protest possible, without at the same time succumbing to a certain puritanism about beauty and pleasure, or to a raw political sociologism that resists everything rare and individual? Parrington thought it among the primary limitations of the genteel tradition that its literary historians had “an exaggerated regard for esthetic values,” that they did not “enter sympathetically into the world of masculine intellectual and material struggles,” and that they “sought daintier fare than polemics”—thus reiterating that characteristic American male reproach of absorption in the effeminate and the unreal that had so long been made against men of complex and delicate sensibility. In his defense it must be said that he did not pretend to shed light upon the creative act itself or to be a critic. “With aesthetic judgments I have not been greatly concerned,” he wrote—which could surely not have been an attempt to deny that his book contained such judgments, but only an invitation not to regard them as essential or take them altogether seriously. Presumably he meant only to remedy the failures of literary gentility by looking steadily at the “masculine” and material values in literature, and to do this by writing a history of our political expression as though it were a history of literature. He was concerned, he hoped to make clear, “with the total pattern of American thought—the broad drift of major ideas.”

But just as he failed to see that a history of literature must not (and in his case did not) avoid esthetic judgments, he failed to see that the history of political ideas too, even when we look for its total pattern, is composed of particularities; that to discern its drift, no matter how broad, is a task which requires, as good criticism does, a certain delicacy of touch.

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8 I, vi; II, i; III, xx.
CHAPTER 11

Criticism and Political Thought

To enter once more into the spirit of those fine old idealisms, and to learn that the promise of the future has lain always in the keeping of liberal minds that were never discouraged from their dreams, is scarcely a profitless undertaking.

—V. L. Parrington

To love ideas is excellent, but to understand how ideas themselves are conditioned by social forces is better still.

—V. L. Parrington, 1917

I

The method and design of Parrington’s Main Currents discloses a marked disproportion between his object and the means to reach it. He insisted that he was not making esthetic judgments or writing a conventional history of literature, but he included so many writers whose political ideas were inconsequential that their presence could be justified only by their stature as imaginative writers; and it is hardly necessary to say that he did in fact, as one must, make some judgments about their worth as writers. On the other hand, he chose to leave out or subordinate a few writers who had political ideas of decisive importance, a procedure which impaired his scheme as a plan for a history of political thought. The work is thus haunted throughout by an unresolved ambiguity, a suspension between political thought and literature. That the undefined area where literature and politics intersect is a legitimate subject need not be disputed. But to write well about our political-literary culture requires a fine feeling for the nuances of ideas which was hardly the strongest quality of the Progressive mind. Much too often we are left with the sense that Parrington has not succeeded in finding the relation between politics and litera-

ture, but only in putting them into awkward juxtaposition. His method, moreover, was biographical, and biography requires a certain patience with the individuality of the materials as well as a feeling for the nature of each subject’s development, which was hardly feasible within the framework of his plan. These difficulties are related to the other basic defects of Main Currents: its lack of penetration in depth, of historical specificity, and—as a corollary of this last—of a feeling for the actual historical movement of ideas.

Consider first the plan of Parrington’s book. It is a series of biographical-intellectual portraits linked together by several explanatory connective sequences. The portraits number almost a hundred, and if the author had lived to complete the scheme sketched out in the table of contents of his third volume, he would probably have needed still a fourth volume, and would have added some forty more. Here the very nobility of his conception became an obstacle: his plan required him to read so extensively that penetrating inquiry was possible only at a few points, and to write with such rigid compression that not a single writer could get extended discussion. Where his model, Taine, had felt free to take seventy pages or more for an author, Parrington allowed himself in the longest of his sketches to take no more than fourteen or fifteen. In order to include scores of minor literary figures of hardly more than incidental and symptomatic significance for the development of American thought, he had to neglect the dynamics of the basic ideas, and to cut his portraits of central political writers to a pattern so cramped that he could not seriously deal with them: it is all but impossible, for instance, to cope in fifteen pages with the complexities, nuances, and changes in John Adams’s thought, or with the subtle problems of interpretation posed by Jefferson. And for James Madison, a thinker of absolutely central importance, Parrington found no place at all, aside from a few pages in an account, itself far too perfunctory, of The Federalist.

The ambiguity of Parrington’s intent and the multi-
plicity of his sketches go far to explain his difficulty in getting below the surface. His tendentious purpose and the simple dualism of his scheme help to explain the abstractness, the static quality in his conception of intellectual development. At the beginning of his admiring sketch of Roger Williams, Parrington makes a significant suggestion that sums up a major premise of his work. Williams, he concludes, though in manner and speech a Puritan controversialist, was really "contemporary with successive generations of prophets from his own day to ours"—a forerunner, in fact, of Locke and the natural-rights school, of Paine and the French romantics, of Channing and the Unitarians, of Emerson and the transcendentalists. Main Currents, indeed, has a very full quota of forerunners and precursors, and as one reads with an eye for its sense of intellectual filiations and continuities, the significance of the metaphor in Parrington's title emerges: we are in the presence of two great historical currents that course through our history, the currents, roughly speaking, of democratic and antidemocratic thought. Through changing intellectual assumptions and through various phases of manner and speech, we deal in substance, always and recurrently, with the same age-old controversy. The major thinkers of the past are summoned up, in effect, as contemporaries of each other and ourselves. The colonial Americans, for example, were "old-fashioned only in manner and dress," and the subjects they dealt with were at heart "much the same themes with which we are engaged and with which our children will be engaged after us." Whitman, enlisted for democracy, was "fighting the battle of 1790 over again." The great debate of the Progressive era "was the struggle of 1789 over again." Even the Puritans must be understood in this way as thoroughly reformed moderns, for if we discard their strange manner and dress to interest ourselves solely in the matter of their arguments, "and if we will resolutely translate the old phrases into modern equivalents, if we will put aside the theology and fasten attention on the politics and economics of the struggle, we shall have less difficulty in discovering that the new principle for which those old Puritans were groping was the later familiar doctrine of natural rights..."

The suggestion that the theological forms of Puritan thought are like transient fashions in dress, and that we will understand the true content of Puritan thought better if we brush aside Puritan theology, is the counterpart, in intellectual history, of Parrington's canon in literary theory that esthetic judgments are of incidental concern and belong to the "narrower bellettristic." There is, as he sees it, a hidden core, a basic substance, to history; and once we have found this, the essential thing, we have reached reality and have come to the point at which the actual contemporaneity of history can be clearly perceived. The true significance of our ancestors lies just here: in their contemporaneity.

There is, of course, a sense in which Parrington's disposition to abstract from the specificity of historical events can be defended. Later struggles for democracy have something in common with earlier struggles for democracy—if indeed we can be sure that that is what they actually were—and it would be impossible to generalize at all if it were impermissible to look for such resemblances. In Parrington's history, however, the conviction of the similarity seems to have preceded an examination of the particularities of events and at times to have taken the place of such an examination. His method, then, is governed not simply by the defensible assumption that our ancestors had something in common with us but by the far less defensible one that the respects in which they will be found to differ from us are of little consequence. The result is that in his search for the hard core of "reality" Parrington's view of things becomes, paradoxically, increasingly abstract, and we get carried further and further away from what was really on the minds of Roger Williams, John Cotton, and their successors. For example, in his long sequence on Puritan thought Parrington found occasion only for fleeting mention of the Half-Way Covenant and the troublesome problems of church polity it was meant

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1 III, xxv, 83.

2 I, 6. One is reminded here of Beard's belief that Puritan religious thought was "the defense mechanism of men who were engaged in resisting taxes and other exactions" and his confidence that "the historian need not tarry long with the logical devices of men in action." Rise, I, 37.
These problems may have been frippery to the Progressive mind, but they were meat and drink to the Puritans; indeed the Puritans' ideas of church polity provided the conceptual model for their understanding of civil polity, and without them their political theory cannot be understood. We may profitably turn our attention, as Parrington suggests, to "the politics and economics of the struggle" but to "put aside the theology," as he also enjoins us, will only guarantee that we will never comprehend them at all. It is this lack of concern with the immediate terms on which intellectual problems present themselves to the makers of history that accounts for our failure to get from Parrington a feeling for the movement of ideas, their change in function in different situations. One looks to him in vain for an account or explanation of just how Puritanism gave way to latitudinarianism and to the skeptical thought of the Enlightenment, how transcendentalism emerged in the Unitarian environment, or how the laissez-faire ideas that seemed so radical in some of the left-wing Jacksonians turned up in such an ultraconservative guise forty years later when people were reading Herbert Spencer. In Main Currents ideas do not develop, they only recur.

Some of the static quality in the work comes from Parrington's very passion for form and proportion. As E. H. Eby reports, his love of architecture carried over into his book and determined the structure he would give it. One need only look at the Table of Contents of his first volume to see how this urge toward design affects its organization. It is full of counterpoise—the stewards of theocracy versus the independents, the Mather dynasty versus the liberals, Edwards against Franklin, the mind of the Whig against the mind of the Tory, and, among the later political thinkers, "The English Group" against "The French Group," the Constitution against the Declaration of Independence. Each sketch is touched off by some key designation upon which everything depends. As Professor Eby writes, Parrington began with a thesis, fixed in a phrase, a sentence, or a revealing figure, and he was so habituated to follow the dictates of this formula that "his ability to write would be blocked until he had in mind a perfectly crystallized concept expressible at the maximum in one sentence." For a long time he was suspended over the Gilded Age, but could not get on with his writing until the indispensable title occurred to him. Finally, after some weeks, he showed relief. "I have found the phrase," he said: "I will call it the Great Barbecue"—and so the work went on. The advantages of this mode of presentation are clear enough: one always knows where one is in Parrington's volumes, and the atmosphere of each scene, the role of each actor, is firmly fixed at the beginning. Its disadvantage hangs on the fact that history itself does not take place architectonically, but with a fluid dialectic of its own. It is capricious, asymmetrical, organic, rather than geometrical; and if it is to be likened to architecture it is more like a church by Gaudi than one by Wren. Ideas appear, make their mark in one context, begin to change form, and then sometimes, rather suddenly, change function also. The architectonic conception, then, for all the obvious merits it had in organizing an accessible popular work, accounts in some part for the static feeling one gets, the sense that in his love of counterposing sets of ideas Parrington has all too often neglected to get them into motion.

The sheer size of his cast of characters required Parrington to paint a large number of portraits, but the limited and predetermined nature of his interest in his writers, his belief that many of the specifics of their intellectual lives were not of enduring importance, left him with only limited means by which to render their features. He painted with a palette confined, by his own decision, to a few stark primary colors and permitted himself only the broadest and boldest strokes of the brush. It became necessary for him to classify almost every writer in relation to certain very broad categories drawn from the spheres of political, literary, and intellectual history. Such terms as realism and romanticism, conserva-

8 III, vi.
tism, liberalism, and individualism thus took on a saliency in his writing that is unfortunately not matched by their clarity or sharpness of definition. He knew that these terms are difficult and imprecise, and he tried to take honest cognizance of the fact by putting them in the plural—which was a way of acknowledging their multiple meanings but not of coming to grips with them. This device accounts for a noticeable awkwardness in his abstractions, his references to the "liberalisms implicit in the Puritan Revolution," or the "liberalisms implicit in Plymouth Congregationalism," "the inchoate idealisms of English Puritanism," the "diverse liberalisms" that were being stifled by the Massachusetts Bay oligarchy, "the liberalisms involved in Luther's premises," "the nineteenth century with its cargo of romanticisms," and indeed of the whole complex of "ebullient romanticisms" with which his second volume was concerned. He found it important to place the individual writer in relation to these large tendencies in thought, which were sometimes almost personified, as when he said of Godkin: "His realism was a profound discouragement to his idealism." Now and then these abstractions rattle against each other: "Overseas liberalisms had flourished in the soil that proved inhospitable to overseas conservativisms, and it was these European liberalisms that provided the mold into which ran the fluid experience of America to assume substantial form." It is almost as though Parrington at a late point in his work had read Arthur O. Lovejoy's famous paper of 1924, "On the Discrimination of Romanticism," and had taken its lesson, if not exactly to heart, at least into his rhetoric, and had gone through his text and changed many of his key terms from the singular to the plural.  

Parrington also worked with a set of fundamental count-

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5 It is possible that Parrington (though he disliked the Modern Language Association and did not take its periodicals) might have read Lovejoy's essay. It appeared in PMLA, which is often seen, if not always read, by university teachers of English. In this essay Lovejoy asked what could be done to diminish a confusion of terminology "which has for a century been the scandal of literary history and criticism," and suggested, among other devices, that "we should learn to use the word 'romanticism' in the plural." PMLA, 39 (1924), 239-53. See Lovejoy's Essays in the History of Ideas (1948), 234-5.

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6 1, 368.
7 1, 53. Because Parrington's characterizations of individual writers are easy to find in the relevant chapters, I have here documented only those quotations which, having no obvious place, would be hard to find.
a necessary counterpoise to numerous men of quite another breed. Thomas Hutchinson had not "the faintest spark of idealism," John Trumbull "was not a political idealist," and Hamilton (it seems hardly necessary to say) "was without a shred of idealism, unless a certain grandiose quality in his conceptions be accounted idealism." Federalists in general do badly here: "One might as well look for the sap of idealism in a last year's stump as in John Marshall," and Fisher Ames "naturally . . . regarded every idealist, the Rousseaus and Paines and Jeffersons, as 'democratick babblers'" and the enemies of law and order.

Some of Parrington's other counters were deployed in his assessments of motives. His are moral as well as intellectual portraits, perhaps moral portraits primarily. We should not cavil at the presence of such evaluations. It is only that Parrington's attributions of motive are so one-sided and so predictable. Orthodox Puritans, Tories, Federalists generally fail to win his admiration for one or more of three failings: profit, power, and pride. Even Samuel Sewall, kindly and neighborly though he was, probably stood unintelligently against all popular movements because of his "subconscious concern for his material interests." In Cotton Mather nothing "can obscure the motive of personal ambition," and vanity provides "the sufficient explanation" of his various political activities; he came by it legitimately because his father, Increase, had been "ambitious and self-seeking," "wanting in self-denying love." The Tories were moved by vanity and arrogance: "Their most cherished dream was the institution of an American nobility, with the seal of royal favor set upon their social pretensions." Thomas Hutchinson was "avaricious of power, even more than of money," and his entire philosophy, a compression of Toryism, represented simply "the will-to-power of the wealthy." The conservative John Dickinson, "as a large property owner, . . . hastened to the defense of the principle of self-taxation"—which leads one to wonder if this was not a view also sympathetic to small property owners in America. A strong conservative like Francis Hopkinson, who joined the Revolution but later became a stout Federalist, is easily accounted for: "His Whiggery was probably commercial in origin, a reflection of the economic interests of the merchant class with which he mingled." The "mendacious" Anglican clergyman, Samuel Peters, a strong advocate of episcopacy whose "better qualities were corroded by overwhelming conceit," was a man with "all the arrogance of a lord." John Marshall was easy to understand: "His financial interests overran state boundaries and his political principles followed easily in their train, washing away all local and sectional loyalties." Webster, for all his rich native endowment, was, after all, "the greatest corporation lawyer of the day, certain to be found defending vested interests, never on the side of the leaner purse." The one great disinterested act of Webster's life, the Seventh of March speech, in which he sacrificed his provincial reputation and exposed himself to the fury of New England reformers in his eagerness to preserve the Union, Parrington, in common with many other writers, saw as merely another token of his hopeless materialism.

To find a certain unchristian pride in some Puritan leaders or a concern for money among rich merchants and their legal spokesmen or a note of class arrogance in the Tory rich puts no strain on our credulity, and independent study might bring us to similar judgments. But the same kind of moral realism does not infuse Parrington's judgments of his idealists and humanitarians, who are not only free, as we might well suppose, of the desire for gain, but of vanity and ambition as well. Thomas Hooker, seen as a man of democratic sympathies, was "a simple man in worldly ambitions as well as in origin, not given to climbing or feathering his own nest." John Wise, the village democrat, was "uninfected by the itch of publicity that attacked so many of his fellow ministers." Crevecoeur, though he yielded in the end to his Loyalist sympathies, was at heart a frontier democrat, "devoid of petty ambition and local prejudice," and strangely enough, "an embodiment of the generous spirit of French revolutionary thought." Samuel Adams preferred politics to profits: "He was
no self-seeking politician, but a man of vision,” and “all cynical and sordid interpretations of his strange career” are beside the point. Freneau was “wholly free from lust of economic aggression, either for himself or for his class. . . . There was no envy in the soul of Freneau, and no self-seeking.” As for Joel Barlow, another sound republican, “politics for profit was a sorry spectacle to him,” even though he was an agent for a speculative land company. One of the few non-idealists to join this company—Parrington had a disposition to be a little tender to Southern spokesmen—was Alexander Stephens, who was “never selfishly ambitious.”

If idealists were sometimes a bit sharp, they had the best of excuses. If they failed to be lovable, they had provocation. Freneau, for example, was often ruthless, and his writings reveal him as “a good hater”; but after all, “it was an age of partisan ruthlessness, and if Freneau was a fierce partisan it was because the new hope then whispering to liberals was in danger of being stifled by selfish men who feared it. . . . If like Sam Adams he was given to robbing men of their characters, it was due to no personal or selfish motives; those great ones whom he lampooned so fiercely, he believed were enemies of the new order.” And so with Sam Adams: “To stimulate what we call today class consciousness was a necessary preliminary to a democratic psychology. . . . The ways of the iconoclast are rarely lovely, and the breaking of idols is certain to wound sensitive souls.” If Adams also robbed men of their characters, as Hutchinson charged, it was because the respect that attached to men like Hutchinson was a part of their authority. “For the good of America their power must be destroyed. Doubtless Adams was ungenerous in attack; certainly he was vindictive in his hates; but the cold record as we read it today justifies one in the belief that the men whom he attacked were tools of the ministry and must be struck down if the rights of Massachusetts were to be preserved.” It is only where William Lloyd Garrison was concerned that Parrington paused to give thought to the problems of ruthless radical prophecy. Single-minded men like Garrison and John Brown, he remarked, “sometimes do succeed in moving mountains; but unfortunately they leave a great scar, and the débris litters the whole countryside.” And even after the waste of the leveling, other mountains may arise, for out of Emancipation came the Fourteenth Amendment, due process of law, and the whole apparatus of capitalist exploitation. Here, for a moment, we get a glimpse of the difficulty of things: “The devil understands the ways of the world too well to become discouraged at a temporary set-back, for if righteousness succeed in breaking the bonds that bind a generation, he knows that the market place carries an ample stock of new cords to replace those that are broken.”

In characterizing his idealists and reformers, Parrington broke with the environmental determinism as well as with the search for motives that colors his accounts of his villains. Power, pride, and profit move the conservatives and possessors and they can always be understood, sometimes with and sometimes without sympathy or a note of admiration, by reference to their location in society. For idealists it is necessary to derive their motive power from some more mysterious and inaccessible inner resources, since society, as Parrington conceives it, does not seem in itself to generate the reform impulse in the way that it generates self-seeking. Roger Williams simply “lived in the realm of ideas,” and “his actions were creatively determined by principles”; Franklin transcended his environment and in a rare way “freed [himself] from the prejudice of custom . . . a free man who went his own way with imperturbable good will and unbiased intelligence”; William Cullen Bryant’s nature was “self-pollinizing.” Wendell Phillips came out of morally backward Back Bay, but did not accept its prejudices because “something deep within him, a loyalty to other and higher ideas, held him back. . . . An instinctive love of justice held him back.”

9 If I give little stress to this gap in Parrington’s “environmental” view of ideas, it is because it has been more than once commented upon, and is well documented by Robert A. Skotheim and Kermit Vanderbilt, “Vernon Louis Parrington: The Mind and Art of a Historian of Ideas,” Pacific Northwest Quarterly, 53 (1962), 103-4.
The charge often made against critics who work exclusively in American studies that they overestimate American writing is one that can never be responsibly pressed against Parrington. He looked at the faults as well as the virtues of American writers—and what an imperfect lot they are, especially if they stand in the traditions of Puritanism, Federalism, Brahminism, or modern conservatism. No anti-American from another literary culture would be likely to draw up a more consistent list of limited men. It begins with the substantial Puritan diarist, Judge Samuel Sewall, whose “intellectual interests were few,” who “cared nothing for pure literature, and was unacquainted with the English classics,” whose mind ran to things “either occult or inconsequential,” and who was “quite without imagination”—and it goes steadily on from there. That pillar of the Puritan order, Increase Mather, “was quite unread in the political philosophers and wholly ignorant of major principles,” having read none of the major writers from Locke on. “Ideas in the abstract held no interest for him.” As he had a conventional mind, he was “incurious intellectually.” His son Cotton Mather “knew no other political philosophy than that of the obsolete theocracy in which he had grown up,” and his work was “barren of ideas.” Even the undeniably learned Jonathan Edwards suffered stultification because he remained “isolated in Massachusetts” and was denied the opportunity of mingling with “the leaders of thought in London.” The royal governor, Thomas Hutchinson, though a historian of parts, had not even read Locke, was “little given to intellectual interests,” and “his knowledge of political classics was of the slightest.” He was “only an unintelligent politician who served the hand that fed him.” John Dickinson shared the regrettable quality of many men versed in the law, of knowing little else. “He rarely refers to political authorities.” Unlike Hutchinson, he had read Locke, but he ignored him. In the end, though a cultivated lawyer, Dickinson emerges as “in no sense a serious political thinker.” His “Fabius” letters in defense of the Constitution contain “not a single illuminating comment.” The Tory satirist Jonathan Odlle fares still worse: “Of any valid or reasoned philosophy, social or political, he was as wanting as a child.” He was a man of “vast ignorance.” Alexander Hamilton, though perspicacious and admittedly a

"great master of modern finance." was otherwise lacking: he was "not a political philosopher in the large meaning of the term," comparing badly with John Adams in his knowledge of history and with Jefferson in his studies of politics. (He compares badly also with Thomas Paine, who was likewise not to be compared with Adams as a student, but who somehow "absorbed ideas like a sponge.") The mind of Timothy Dwight, president of Yale and pillar of Connecticut Federalism, "was closed as tight as his study windows in January." It is true that he read widely in rationalist writings, "but he read only to refute." The Connecticut Wits, to whom Parrington had given some special attention, "were not devoid of cleverness, but they were wanting in ideas. They were partisans rather than intellectuals." Perhaps in emulation of Dwight,1 "they sealed the windows of their minds against the disturbing winds of doctrine that were blowing briskly," and rather gratuitously "chose to remain too ignorant to be interesting." National independence, with its new problems, did little to quicken the minds of men who stood in this tradition. The easygoing Justice John Marshall, we are hardly surprised to learn, "was wholly wanting in intellectual interests. Strangely ill-read in the law, he was even more ignorant of history and economics and political theory. . . . There is no indication that he had ever heard of the Physiocratic school of economics, or had looked into the writings of Rousseau or Godwin or Paine. The blind sides of his mind were many," though what he did see and understand he at least grasped firmly. The Virginia lawyer and biographer William Wirt was "curiously ignorant of the economic and political philosophy of agrarianism," though it flourished around him, and he "was little given to abstract speculation on the rights of man." Jefferson Davis had "little intellectual curiosity." Even the learned immigrant scholar Francis Lieber was a victim of legalism and of "his failure to investigate the economics of politics." The Charleston intellectual, Hugh Legaré, was a similar case: he had "read too many law books" and speculated too little on politics. "Immersed in his codes, he had forgotten to inquire into the hidden springs of sovereignty," and "in his contempt for practi-

1 Or even of Increase Mather, who also "closed the windows of his mind against the winds of new doctrine."
cal politics he had neglected to study even the primer of economic determinism”—a strong reproach to a man who died five years before the Communist Manifesto was written. Legaré accepted the economics of Adam Smith, but was seriously handicapped by "his ignorance of the economics of John Taylor." Henry Clay, as we might by now expect, was "unread in history and political theory," and if this is true one need hardly be surprised to find Andrew Jackson, for all that can be said for him on other counts, "almost wholly lacking in political and social philosophy." Augustus Longstreet, the Georgia writer, "had no intellectual curiosity and was incapable of rigorous intellectual processes." Washington Irving, for all his gaiety and humor, "was lacking in a brooding intellectualism." Justice Story was another of those lawyers who troubled Parrington for being too immersed in their law books: "Against such a mind, deeply read in the law and with scanty knowledge of economics and political theory, the waves of liberal and romantic thought broke impotently," Whittier, though approved on other counts, "felt rather than thought," being a man of "conscience rather than intellect," who never thought about economics and appears not to have read even such supposedly congenial writers as Rousseau, Palme, and Jefferson. We need not look for anything better from Longfellow: "There was little intellect in Longfellow, little creative originality. . . . The winds of doctrine and policy might rage through the land, but they did not rattle the windows of his study to disturb his quiet poring over Dante." Hawthorne's notebooks provide "the occasional record of one who lived an unintellectual life. . . . Few books are referred to; systems of thought lie beyond his ken. Compared with the thinkers and scholars of his time he is only an idler lying in wait for such casual suggestions as he may turn into stories." Lowell, again, had "no interest in ideas, only a pottering concern for the text. . . . Scarcely an important movement of contemporary thought awakened his interest. . . . He never took the trouble to ground himself in the elements of politics," and "of American constitutional history he was as ignorant as a politician." Thomas Bailey Aldrich, an embodiment of "intellectual sterility," was worse: "Of many things that concern men greatly

be was very, very ignorant. Of the American people beyond the Hudson River, he knew nothing. Of social economics he knew nothing." Sarah Orne Jewett, for all her strivings for realism, "was as ignorant as her Maine fisherfolk of the social forces that were blotting out the world of her fathers," and Mary Wilkins Freeman's thinking "on social questions was still in its teens." She had a warm heart, "but her inadequate knowledge of economics served her ill." The fact that Theodore Dwight Woolsey's speculations on the state were thought to be significant is only "added confirmation of the shallowness of the Gilded Age." Indeed most of the critics of the Gilded Age, including some very well-meaning ones, were "ill equipped . . . intellectually lean and impoverished" as the result of too much constitutional debate, "uninstructed idealists with no understanding of Realpolitik." The entire self-constituted educated leadership of the Gilded Age consisted of "second-rate men—mediocre minds cramped by a selfish environment, imbued with no more than a property-consciousness." John Hay was a perfect example of this, the product of an education that "seems to have been faulty." George William Curtis, one of its finer and saner spirits and a most useful man, was still "not a great scholar and not an acute critic," and "never a serious student of politics in the broader sense . . . an inadequate political philosopher . . . as helpless in diagnosing the evil as Lowell or Norton." Even the distinguished Godkin, a man of such wide range and once so well in touch with things, turned out to be in the end "a very ignorant or shallow critic, blinded by his prejudices . . . he seems [by the 1890's] to have done no serious reading in economic theory for half a century." John Fiske, though once intellectually curious and a brilliant popularizer of science, was a poor interpreter of the American past, having "an inadequate knowledge and an inadequate philosophy. . . . The economics of historical change he seems never to have considered, and his analyses of social forces are never acute or penetrating."

Ignorant as they were, the members of the Puritan-
Brahmin-Tory-Federalist tradition produced a heavy portion of anarchomaniacs. John Winthrop was "unable to adapt old prejudices to new conditions," Samuel Sewall "refused to go forward with the changing times," Increase Mather came to be mocked at in Boston because "he had outlived his age," and his son Cotton was "an anarchomaniac in his own day"; Jonathan Edwards, "the greatest mind of New England, had become an anarchomaniac in a world that bred Benjamin Franklin." Thomas Hutchinson "never understood the assertive capitalism that was rising about him." The Tory Jonathan Boucher spoke with "the voice of seventeenth-century Cavalier England." John Dickinson was "incapable of understanding current economic forces either in England or in America," and belonged "in that older world in which he was bred." John Trumbull remained "an echo... throughout his life." The mind of the Old South, though Parrington found some sympathy for its resistance to centralized power, was still found to be "so archaic... as to appear singular." One of its keenest critics, Whittier, so much esteemed for his honest conscience, was still "fast becoming an anarchomaniac in industrial New England." Hawthorne "lived in the shadow of a Puritan past," and seemed wholly anarchomorphic. By the time of the 1870s and 1880s "the incurious Boston mentality missed pretty much everything vital and significant in American life." Thomas Bailey Aldrich "traveled back a hundred years." Godkin, with his archaic program of reading, certainly "did not go forward to meet new times." Henry Adams even "seemed to himself a somewhat pathetic anarchomaniac."

It is not that Parrington was singularly ungenerous. Quite the contrary: he usually welcomed the chance to make even his less favored subjects sympathetic or understandable. Moreover, the art of depreciation, as applied to standard American writers, was well developed among the critics of his time—Brooks and Mencken stand out here, but there were others—and Parrington was writing in a common idiom. Nor was he so wrong in his estimates: he was neither the first nor the last writer to find a certain flabbiness of thought and thinness of sensibility in some of the men he dealt with, and his acid judgments frequently seem not wide of the mark. What does trouble me in these estimates is their essential sameness, the predictable uniformity of his reproaches, the forceful, if rather indirect suggestion that most of these writers suffered from the same combination of vanity and selfishness, the same lack of robustness and realism, and that they would all have been cured in roughly equal measure if they had infused themselves with large doses of "idealism" and then read liberally in the Physiocrats, Rousseau, Jefferson, and John Taylor of Caroline County.

I am tempted also to offer the unprovable guess that Parrington was extraordinarily preoccupied with the idea of men ill prepared for their tasks, insufficiency educated, and unreceptive to ideas coming from outside their own tradition. The modest tone in which he spoke of his own omissions, doubtful interpretations, and hasty generalizations seems to me to be truer to the man than the hauteur with which he appeared to dispose of one uncongenial writer after another. But his role was, by his canons, a difficult one. He had committed himself to a kind of economic realism which, by his own reckoning, appeared to require a firm foundation in economic "reality"—a thing he constantly sought in those he read. Yet his own notions of economics were not well grounded. When he refers to a parochial windbag like John Taylor as the source of some arcane or indispensable wisdom on economic matters, or classifies Bastiat with Louis Blanc and Proudhon as a "left-wing" economist, or when he tells us that part of the trouble with Hawthorne was that he "never grappled with economics as Thoreau did," or again when he imagines that Hamilton, as an avid reader of Adam Smith, stood in the tradition of English liberalism instead of seeing him as a bridge between the older mercantilism and the new economic nationalism of Friedrich List, I begin to wonder if he must not have been half-aware of the contrast between the state of his own preparation in economics and the stringent demands he made upon other American writers.3 In this sense, Parrington had cast himself in a role he particularly disliked—that of the "narrow bellettrist" writing upon matters concerning which the wisdom of "the economist" seems more important. He preached with the desperation of a minister who doubts his own salvation.

3 II, x, 449; I, 396; the italics are added.
It remains only to look at the main currents of American thought as Parrington saw them. His characteristic procedure was to describe certain major ideas or tendencies that came from Europe—English Independency and Whiggery, French romantic theory, the laissez-faire ideas that arose with modern industry and commerce, nineteenth-century science as it affected social and literary thought, the various strains of Continental utopianism or collectivism—and to examine their course in the American environment. Usually he saw two sets of ideas as being brought into direct and blunt confrontation. He was fascinated, as many writers had been before him, with the battle waged in Puritan New England between dissent and a rigid system of doctrine, and then between what he took to be the correlated principles of aristocracy and democracy. “Unfortunately,” he wrote, “the liberal doctrine of natural rights was entangled in New England with an absolutist theology that conceived of human nature as inherently evil, that postulated a divine sovereignty absolute and arbitrary, and projected caste divisions into eternity—a body of dogmas that it needed two hundred years’ experience in America to disintegrate.” 4 The first part of his work was concerned with the long continuing clash between liberal political philosophy and “reactionary theology” culminating in a rather rapid deterioration of the Puritan system at the close of the seventeenth and the early decades of the eighteenth century.

Outside New England a similar process of liberation took place, but against less resistance. There, various European immigrants reacted more directly to the stimulus of the new environment and a great population of yeomen developed the philosophy that was to be characteristic of America for a hundred years or more. “It was to these scattered and undistinguished colonials that French romantic theory was brought by a group of intellectuals in the latter years of the eighteenth century, a philosophy so congenial to decentralized society that it seemed to provide an authoritative sanction for the clarifying ideals of a republican order, based on the principle of home rule, toward which colonial experience was striving.” Now this French romantic theory, which was “spreading widely through the backwoods of America,” provided a view of human nature antagonistic to the Puritan view, a new view of man as potentially excellent, capable of indefinite development. It argued for a government circumscribed in its powers and for a social policy that deferred to the great and virtuous mass of yeomen farmers. At the same time, English liberalism was fortifying itself in the commercial towns, promulgating a philosophy based on the values of the market place, stressing competition, seeing human nature as being above all acquisitive, ministering to the needs of those who profited from commercial expansion.

Parrington traces these currents of thought through two sharply counterposed sets of thinkers, matched in pairs at almost every point along the way. On one side are the stewards of the theocratic order, such men as John Winthrop, John Cotton, and the Mathers, followed in a later age by Jonathan Edwards, who tried to infuse new life into a dying Calvinist orthodoxy. In later political debates these men were followed by the more conservative Whigs like John Dickinson, by outright Tories like Thomas Hutchinson, and by the architects of the new coercive state, the exponents of commercialism and minority control symbolized and led by Alexander Hamilton. Against them is the camp of the idealists—the independents, dissenters, liberals, democrats, humanitarians—represented at their best by Roger Williams, Thomas Paine, and John Locke as opponents of the theocracy; by Franklin, Jefferson, and Paine as spokesmen of the more secular, enlightened, democratic, and humane movements of the eighteenth century.

In dealing with the political thought of the Revolution, Parrington was modest and candid. He realized how puzzling the event was for historians (it remains so even now), but in his own stab at accounting for its thought he followed the traditions of Progressive historiography, emphasizing the role of “liberal impulses in the background of the American mind.”
which had been precipitated into militancy by the crisis in the British Empire after the Seven Years War. An ungainly coalition of aggressive, profit-minded town merchants, aristocratic planters in debt to English merchants, and frontier liberals who stood for republican principles had brought about the Revolution. It was the last faction, he concluded, that provided the revolutionary dynamic. "In every colony the party of incipient populism had been checked and thwarted by royal officials; and it was this mass of populist discontent, seeing itself in danger of being totally crushed, and its interests ignored, that provided the rank and file of armed opposition to the King."

The period of state-making and internal debate that followed the Revolution, Parrington accounted for on lines substantially like those drawn by Beard and J. Allen Smith. What was unique in his own account was chiefly his sense of the derivation of the ideas in the debate. For him the opposition to the new Constitution was founded not in old ideas of English republicanism qualified by American experience but rather in "the humanitarian theory of the French thinkers." He saw the opponents of the Constitution as being handicapped in the great debate because the principles of French romanticism and Physiocratic agrarianism were not yet sufficiently known and accepted on American soil, and because the principles of democracy had not yet been clarified by Jacobinism. The leading English authorities like Locke, at best aristocratic republicans, were of no use to emergent democracy. Lacking discipline and cohesion as well as a developed political theory, the populists lost to "the money group," which was able to "overwhelm the silent majority with clamorous argument" and to establish "the coercive state." Still, on the merits of the matter, and even without quite enough French theory to draw on, Parrington thought the Anti-Federalists had much the better of the case. As political thinking, he saw very little in The Federalist, which is "of interest only to students of constitutional law and practice," and must be seen as a "frankly partisan" attempt to stave off popular rule and underwrite government by the minority. In striking contrast, Richard Henry Lee's Anti-Federalist pamphlet, Letters from the Federal Farmer, is so outstanding for its "calmness and fair-mindedness" that it "ill deserves the name partisan."

Jefferson's victory in 1800 at last put liberalism in the saddle, and greatly extended the influence of French humanitarian thought. However, it left the eighteenth-century aristocratic class still in possession of the vantage points of polite culture. Eventually the new romanticism of the middle class shouldered aside the aspirations of both gentlemen and farmers. The flourishing romanticism of the years from the War of 1812 to the Civil War is the theme of Parrington's second volume. Romanticism in different guises prevailed in the South, in New England, and on the Western frontier; but its real strength Parrington somehow found to rest in the middle class. Colonial America had been static, rationalistic, inclined to pessimism; the nineteenth century was ebulliently optimistic, and though it usually saw human nature as acquisitive rather than good or evil, it was content to find it so. Southern romanticism, stemming from Scott, deserted Jefferson for Calhoun, developed the slaveholders' ideal of a Greek democracy—"the most romantic ideal brought forth by our golden age of romance." The idea of Greek democracy was an ingenious one, but it fatally left out of account the middle class that finally destroyed it. The middle states, eclectic in culture, were fundamentally an expression of the mind of Philadelphia and New York. For a long time, under the leadership of Boston Federalism, New England rejected French ideas, and hence lost itself in a morass of reaction; but finally, in the age of Channing, it caught up first with Rousseau and other French thinkers to produce the Unitarians, and then with German idealism to produce the transcendentalists. On the frontier, a coonskin democracy came forth, at once intensely acquisitive and intensely egalitarian. Jacksonian democracy, Parrington believed, owed a great deal to French thought, but at this point in history he apparently felt it had begun to lose its pertinence to economic society, for Jacksonianism, though "it imposed upon America the ideal of democracy to which all must hereafter do lip service,... lost its realistic basis in a Physiocratic economy and wandered in a fog of political equitarianism."

The Civil War broke the last obstacle to a consolidated
capitalism. After Appomattox, "a slave economy could never again thwart the ambitions of the capitalistic economy." Particularism was dead; the future belonged to the machine, to the centralized state, to those who knew how to seize, possess, and enjoy. Americans fell upon the riches of the continent like a gang of frontiersmen invited to a grand barbecue. More sensitive souls might gag at the sight, but few of them had any animating philosophy that would inspire them to resist the depredations of the glutinous individualists. After the long spell of optimism that had come with the romantic era, the combination of industrial capitalism and modern science once again undermined the foundations of hope. A new pessimism, founded not like colonial pessimism on Calvinist theology but on modern mechanistic philosophy, swept over the American mind. Parrington's third volume was concerned both with the implications of this pessimism and with the countervailing promise of critical realism, of the signs of revolt among intellectuals and artists.

IV

His point of view, Parrington explained in a disarmingly candid introduction, was "liberal rather than conservative, Jeffersonian rather than Federalistic, and very likely on my search I have found what I went forth to find, as others have discovered what they were seeking." This avowed partisan dualism accounts in some part for the signal importance that matters of intellectual genealogy had for him. If he considered an intellectual tradition like Calvinism to be bad, he was also rather likely to find that it had a fixed and monolithic character, and little or no capacity for development. Since it could not be expected to evolve, it would have to be overthrown or rejected, and this destructive task would have to be carried out by men stemming from an altogether different tradition. Opposing ideas demand opposing ancestries. Calvinism he thus saw not as having grown gentler and more receptive to modification under the stress of late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century changes, but as having been "grotesque and illiberal to the last," and as having been "finally rejected" by natural rights thinkers and democrats. Although he did have some insight into the positive historical relation between Puritan thought and the natural rights philosophy, Parrington put his primary emphasis upon the opposition between them. His tendency to see two sets of completely opposed ideas in conflict made it impossible for him to see the shared Calvinism of Roger Williams and John Cotton, the basic similarity of the ideas of Thomas Hooker and the Massachusetts theocrats, or the common Whiggery behind the friends and opponents of the Constitution. It also led him to some bizarre notions of intellectual genealogy, of which the most important are the idea that early American dissent had its intellectual foundations in Lutheranism and the idea that the American democratic tradition had its primary animating sources in "French romanticism."

While the settlers of Massachusetts Bay were strong Calvinists, resting their theocracy on firm Calvinist foundations, Parrington imagined that the Pilgrims at Plymouth were far more democratic Separatists drawing their inspiration from Luther. "The teachings of Luther," he wrote, "erected on the major principle of justification by faith, conduced straight to political liberty..." These teachings embodied "the spirit of uncompromising individualism that would eventually espouse the principle of democracy in church and state." Hence Radical Separatists turned naturally to Luther rather than Calvin. Roger Williams could be understood both as "a follower of Luther and a forerunner of French romantic thinkers." Parrington seems to have consulted too exclusively some of Luther's early utterances on "the liberty of the Christian man" and to have ignored entirely the later phases of his political development. The Luther who said: "I would rather suffer a prince doing wrong than a people doing right" makes no appearance in his calculations. In comparing the political impact of Lutheran and Calvinist thought he was almost pathetically unsure. He overemphasized the clarity and constancy of the political theories of both men, as well as overstating their differences from each other as political thinkers.

5 T. 1. 13. 15.
But above all, he put the case the wrong way round. There had been more margin in Calvin than in Luther for a theory of popular resistance to absolute authority; and in Holland, France, Scotland, England, and finally America, it was Calvinist thinkers who had actually made progress toward finding a theological foundation for popular rights. Perhaps more important for the historian of ideas, by ascribing the source of democratic tendencies to Lutheranism, Parrington had turned away from one of the most interesting tendencies in late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thought—the emergence of a strong doctrine of natural rights within the Puritan tradition itself.

Parrington belonged to a generation that found it especially hard to look at the Calvinists in detached historical terms. He had experienced too keenly the ugly little tyrannies of rigid religion at Emporia and again at Oklahoma. Along with so many others of his time, he had emancipated himself from religion with the aid of Darwin and Spencer; and while it is by no means impossible for a predominantly secular mind to enter imaginatively into the Puritan experience (one need think only of the wholly secular Perry Miller in this respect), there were very few among the liberal minds of Parrington’s generation who could have looked upon such an effort of imagination as anything other than an abject return to the intellectual manacles they had just broken. In the wake of their emancipation, Puritanism meant little more than harsh theology, aristocratic or theocratic politics, the stultification of natural human impulses, prudery and intolerance, superstition, and burnings for witchcraft. In criticism, at the same time, Mencken and others were lashing away at the fundamentalist assumptions of large segments of American culture, and were stigmatizing Puritanism, along with frontier influences, for having warped and desiccated American literary culture. The modern rediscovery of the American Puritans,

Note: In his approach to Luther, Parrington seems to have passed by the standard authorities and turned to an unreliable study by Luther H. Waring, The Political Theories of Martin Luther (1920), and to have ignored the course of Luther’s thought after 1535. See Esther E. Burch, “The Sources of New England Democracy,” American Literature, 1 (1929), 115-30.
Parrington the God-intoxicated Roger Williams was “more concerned with social commonwealths than with theological dogmas,” a man whose religion “issued in political theory rather than in theological dogma,” who was “primarily a political philosopher rather than a theologian,” and who indeed anticipated the principles of “local home rule, the initiative and the referendum, and the recall.” Again, Thomas Hooker’s basic intellectual similarity to the other stewards of the Puritan theocracy disappears in Parrington’s treatment, and Hooker too emerges if not as a secular mind at least as a radically democratic thinker.7

Distracted by this single-minded concern for democracy and dissent, Parrington failed to see much significance in the fascinating change that swept over the Puritan community. He paid no attention when even the Mathers went with the tide, espousing toleration and refusing to defend the old ways of their tribe. Instead, like so many other writers, he used the Mathers only as “anachronisms” who personified the old order. In seeking for the causes that overthrew Puritanism from without, Parrington and many of his contemporaries passed up the profound changes that were taking place within. And something in his populistic bias made it impossible for him to see what the process of change was like. For example, writing of the early eighteenth century, Parrington suggested to his readers that although rationalism “might be excluded from the minister’s study, it spread its subtle infection through the mass of the people,” though what actually happened was closer to the reverse. Here again it is the common people that become the vehicles of virtue, just as in the Revolution it is invariably the popular party that provides strength and as later it is in the “backwoods” of America that Physiocratic social idealism spreads. Calvinism is undermined not by the increasing cosmopolitanism of the towns, by science or latitudinarian speculation, but first by the native kindness of


8 T., 148–51, 185. For an early attempt to clarify the decline of old-fashioned clerical influence from about 1680 to 1740, see Clifford K. Shipton, “The New England Clergy of the Glacial Age,” Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 32 (1937), 24–54; this essay was originally written in 1933.
icans. He concluded that if only the American debate over the Constitution had taken place five years later than it did, "after the French Revolution had provided new democratic theory, the disparity of intellectual equipment [that is, between Federalists and Anti-Federalists] would have been far less marked." Indeed, he regarded the enthusiasm for the French Revolution as "the first great popularization of democratic ideals in America."9

The notion that Rousseau was a major source of the ideas of the Declaration of Independence and of democratic thought in the Jeffersonian era was, again, no peculiarity of Parrington's. Many historians and men of letters writing in the Federalist tradition—most of them shockingly ignorant of Jefferson—had taken up this idea as one of a number of ways (so they thought) of discrediting the Virginian as a wild theorist of the French type, and by the sheer force of repetition it gained ground. John Morley, for example, had been persuaded by such writers that the ideas and phrases of the Declaration of Independence came from Rousseau's writing, and many American writers would have followed Lowell in referring to Rousseau as "the father...in politics of Jefferson and Thomas Paine."11 No doubt this notion of a Rousseauian influence got much of its impetus from the memory of the enthusiasm shown among many Jeffersonian Republicans for the French Revolution, though it was a mistake to identify this enthusiasm for the event with an immediate conversion to its ideology or to forget how short-lived the enthusiasm was. But above all, the defenders of Jefferson made a mistake in inverting this Federalist version of intellectual history by simply accepting the idea of the Rousseauian Jefferson and holding that the impact of Rousseau was, after all, an excellent thing.

9 I, 151, 279, 281, 324; II, 325.

Parrington saw Rousseau as having cut an extraordinarily wide swath in the American mind. Thoreau, for example, was "a child of Jean Jacques," Melville "a spiritual child of Jean Jacques," and even Sinclair Lewis was "an echo of Jean Jacques and the golden hopes of the Enlightenment—thin and far off, no doubt, but still an authentic echo."2

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PART IV: V. L. Parrington

No serious student of early American thought has in fact been able to find that Rousseau had any considerable influence here, and it is doubtful that there was a single American thinker of any consequence who professed to owe him anything of importance.2 The Anglo-American tradition of republicanism had taken on a firm character before Rousseau began to write (the Social Contract appeared in 1762) and long before his works were known here. He was occasionally read by Americans, but rather infrequently cited, and then often as the object of disdain, or even, especially after about 1800, of revulsion. His abstract approach to the majority will was quite ungenial to the particular problems of representation that were of utmost concern in America, and it would have been a rare American democrat who could have seen in him much more than a spirited but vague confirmation of sentiments they found expressed more clearly and usably in Anglo-American writing. The major American writer who seems to have known him best was John Adams, and Adams detested him. Jefferson took little or no interest in him, and even Paine, who is supposed to have followed him, found him seriously wanting in guiding principles. It is doubtful that any American democrat who read Rousseau did not imagine that he could get a better intellectual foundation for his political aspirations from more congenial and accessible English sources. The really interesting question is not whether Rousseau had much influence in America but why he struck so few resonances in the American mind.

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2 One had only to seek carefully for the influence of Rousseau in American political thought in order to be able not to find it. Howard Mumford Jones, whose exhaustive study, America and French Culture, 1750-1848, appeared the same year as Parrington's first two volumes, concluded that, as to political theory, "the influence of Rousseau was negligible." P. 369 n.; cf. 372. Carl Becker, in his Declaration of Independence (1925), which, unlike Jones's book, was available to Parrington but which was not cited in his bibliography, remarked: "It does not appear that Jefferson, or any American, read many French books. So far as the "Fathers" were, before 1776, directly influenced by particular writers, the writers were English, and notably Locke." Ed. 1942, 27. See also the finding of Lewis Rosenthal, "Rousseau in Philadelphia," 46-55. Paine is sometimes cited as owing much to Rousseau. He did think that Rousseau's works were full of an elevating spirit of liberty, but he also found that they "leave the mind in love with an object [liberty], without describing the means of possessing it." Rights of Man in Complete Works (ed. 1954), II, 75.
Finally, the notion, so central for Parrington, that American democratic thought owed its economic rationale to the influence of the Physiocrats can be regarded only as a gratuitous intrusion on the facts. Parrington considered the thought of a striking number of his heroes to have been shaped by the economic ideas of the Physiocrats, beginning with the seminal trio of Franklin, Paine, and Jefferson, and going on to Barlow, Crèvecoeur, John Taylor, and Cooper. The Southern mind as a whole also had “a frank bias towards . . . Physiocratic agrarianism.” Various Americans who were not to be classed as openly Physiocratic had “a pronounced bias” toward Physiocratic views of society (Emerson), or were, however informal in their thinking, still Physiocrats by derivation (Jackson, since Jacksonianism was merely “John Taylor’s economics written into the law of the land”), or were instinctive “stepsons” of the Physiocrats without reading them (Greeley), or had at least “a Physiocratic dislike of middlemen” (H. C. Carey), or arrived along an independent path at identical conclusions (Henry George). When the Physiocrats cannot be found, Parrington misses them. Whitman, whom he admired, was, he thought, a superb latter-day representative of Enlightenment thought, but “there was wanting only a physiocratic economics to make it perfect”; and a whole host of writers whom he did not admire were reproached for ignoring or never having gone to school to the Physiocrats.

Had Parrington spoken of physiocracy simply to refer to a generally agrarian cast of thought, there would be little to differ with, for the agrarian bias of so much of the American mind is undeniable; but there are several passages which make it clear that he meant that specific doctrines of Physiocratic economics, including the produit net, the principle of laissez faire, and the proposal of the impôt unique, were literally taken over by American followers. To Jefferson, he asserted, “the appeal of the Physiocratic theory of social economics [was] irresistible,” and the “strongest creative influence on the mature Jefferson” came from Quesnay and Du Pont de Nemours, along with a few other French writers. The struggle between Jeffersonian and Hamiltonian economics was an American version of “a conflict between the rival principles of Quesnay and Adam Smith, between an agrarian and a capitalistic economy.” It was “the Physiocratic conception that explains [Jefferson’s] bitter hostility to protective tariffs, national banks, funding manipulations, the maturity of credit, and all the agencies which Hamilton was skillfully erecting in America.” Accordingly, “Jeffersonian democracy as it spread through Virginia and west along the frontier assumed a pronounced Physiocratic bias.”

In fact Parrington understood the Physiocrats no better than he understood Luther, and was no more successful in finding American followers for them than he was for Rousseau. The Physiocrats were not fundamentally interested in expressing a sentimental agrarianism or in laying the basis for a humanitarian social economics. They were trying to rescue the ancien régime from its fiscal difficulties by devising an economic theory which would justify it in taking adequate tax revenues from landed proprietors. Neither their absolutist political principles nor their ideas about the virtues of a single tax upon the revenue of the land—perish the thought!—were congenial to the American agrarian mind. The warm regard for agricultural life which Parrington attributed almost wholly to them could have been drawn from any of a score of writers in the ancient tradition of pastoral poetry.

Taken superficially, Parrington’s version of intellectual history seems to have been inspired by a kind of Anglophobia that disposed him to accept readily enough the English ancestry of ideas he disliked but caused him to minimize or even deny the English ancestry of ideas he approved. This feeling is charmingly laid bare near the end of his third volume where, discussing the importance of the Progressive attack on the Constitution, he remarks that the myths that had gathered about it were dispelled by the work of J. Allen Smith and Beard, and that “the document was revealed as English

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3 I, 346; II, 20.
4 The supposed influence of the Physiocrats is the subject of my essay, “Parrington and the Jeffersonian Tradition,” Journal of the History of Ideas, 2 (1941), 397-400; see also the Introduction by Gilbert Chinard to The Correspondence of Jefferson and Du Pont de Nemours (1931).
rather than French”—as though this were indeed a revelation, and also the last word in condemnation.\(^5\) A hatred of Tory England was, of course, a vital part of his family inheritance, and it may have been confirmed by the anti-English feeling that was commonplace in the Populist movement. Yet it could be argued that Parrington was at the worst deeply ambivalent about England and English culture, since his own debt to the Victorian moralists was considerable and his response to the country, when he was at last able to visit it, was one of instant affection. More important than his anti-English feeling, I suppose, was his partisan dualism, his uncontrollable passion for schematization, and his flimsy knowledge of the very “sources”—Luther, Rousseau, the Physiocrats—he liked to invoke. But the consequence is unmistakable: a whole series of misleading suggestions in which the traditions he most wanted to celebrate—the traditions of early dissent, of Jeffersonian and Jacksonian democracy, and of secular enlightenment—are desiccated and shorn of even so much of their true history as might have been recoverable in the light of the scholarship of Parrington’s day. To make way for Luther, Quesnay, Du Pont, and Rousseau it was necessary to minimize or ignore America’s inheritance from Coke, Milton, Locke, and Sidney, not to speak of a throng of lesser writers, now interesting perhaps mainly to specialists in the history of thought but once of central importance to American rationalists, revolutionaries, and democrats: those English Arminians, latitudinarians, Whigs, and radicals who were the true precursors and shapers of the American mind.

\(^5\) III, 409.

In his first two volumes, Parrington’s work seems a strong and clear illustration of the Whig interpretation of history: it is avowedly partisan, it takes the side of dissenters and protestants against establishments, of democrats against aristocrats, of revolutionaries against old regimes; it seems to be telling a story of steady progress, pointing toward a certain satisfaction with the enlightened ideas of the present. But then, as it reaches and passes the Civil War, its mood changes. The third volume, which one reviewer labeled a study in disillusionment, is afflicted by that awareness of defeat that so often beclouds the agrarian mind. It becomes tainted with a certain wistfulness or melancholy, and yields now and then to a note of pessimism. Here we find Parrington arriving at a common ground with Turner. Both men had the same misgivings, arising from the decline of agrarian America, the disappearance of the frontier and free land, the same fear that American democracy, once separated from its agrarian and particularist base, might be doomed to go down before the machine and the city. On this count a common strain of poignant nostalgia underlies their thought: while they might be able to see the inevitability of industrial culture and the modern state, neither could find it in himself, as Beard could in the 1930’s, to embrace modernity in the hope that it would lead to a democratic collectivism; and of course neither lived to the era of the New Deal, which constituted a kind of test case for the agrarian liberal mind.

Parrington shrewdly understood that the liberalism of the Progressive era to which he belonged was “the spontaneous reaction of an America still only half urbanized,” and “an attempt to secure through the political state the freedoms that before had come from unpreempted opportunity” on the frontier. He thought about the possibility that his social ideals could be achieved only under socialism, and though I believe that he remained much more the Jeffersonian liberal than the Marxist, he seems to have arrived at a generous, undogmatic, ecumenical radicalism which, seeing no enemies on the left, reached out to embrace many varieties of protest that were hospitable in spirit even if not quite congenial in doctrine. There is no doubt that his private sentiments were more radical than his book, and he might have enjoyed the brief burst of radical literary criticism that came after his death. He had a high regard “for critics of the left wing,” he wrote in 1928 to a radical critic, “for long ago I learned that they were far more likely than conventional critics to have some insight into Realpolitik, and to be able to judge men and programs in the light of underlying principles.” To the same correspondent, who had referred to him as “a diluted Marxian,” he replied
that the remark was "pretty near the truth—at least I was a
good deal of a Marxian and perhaps still am, although a
growing sense of the complexity of social forces makes me
somewhat distrustful of the sufficiency of Marxian formulae."
His use of the term liberal in Main Currents, he also explained,
was a considered one: "I could see no harm and some good in
using the term, and warping it pretty well to the left. As a
matter of fact, in my first draft I used the word radical
throughout, and only on revising did I substitute the other."8
But his idea of Marxian intellectual filiations was an
extremely loose one if one may judge by his belief that the
thought of the later Wendell Phillips exemplified "pretty much
all of Marxism" and that William Dean Howells was "the first
distinguished American man of letters to espouse Marxian
socialism."

If Parrington's agrarianism was overlaid with some
sympathy for proletarian socialism, it was more surely and
profoundly affected by a quite contradictory perennial anti-
institutional strain in American thought which verges toward
anarchism. In him the old American fear of centralized power,
echoed repeatedly in his references to "the coercive state," was
very much alive. Characteristic here was his response to
Herbert Spencer, whom he had first read in the early 1890's.
Seeing in Spencer an intellectual liberator for his secularism
and his anticlericalism, Parrington was also attracted, as no
Marxist could be, by Spencer's view of state power. In his
enthusiasm for the note of anarchism that he found there, a
total dislike of governmental authority that accorded with his
own feeling about "the coercive state," he found it easy to over-
look the less congenial side of Spencer's mind, its laissez-faire
complacency and social Darwinism. Always a little indulgent
to those conservatives whose views were founded in opposition
to state authority, he welcomed the anarchist and noncon-
formist elements in Spencer, his passion for individual liberty
and his faith in progress, and overlooked his hostility to all
plans for human welfare. Spencer, he thought, had achieved

6 Letter to a confidential source, February 24, 1928; on "half-
urbanized" liberalism, Ill, 404.
7 Parrington seems not to have owned any work of Marx, though
he had a full set of the works of William Morris.

8 a fresh justification, based on the findings of Victorian
science, of the master principles of eighteenth-century specu-
lation; its individualism, its liberalism, its passion for justice,
its love of liberty and distrust of every form of coercion," and
concluded that Spencer's final deductions were such "as to
warrant a disciple of Jefferson in becoming a disciple of
Spencer."

His regard for localism and for all who resisted the cen-
tralized state accounted in good part for the tenderness with
which Parrington, despite his antipathy to slavery, racism,
and caste exclusion, treated certain spokesmen of the South.
"I was at particular pains," he explained, "to present the
doctrine of States' Rights sympathetically, partly because it has
had too little recognition and partly because the States' Rights
men were the best liberals of the time."9 Calhoun—who he
struck off splendidly as "a potential intellectual whose mind
was unfertilized by contact with a generous social culture"—
was too harsh a spirit to win his approval. But he did see much
to admire in Calhoun's elaboration of the states-rights doc-
trine, and found his great mistake to lie in linking its fate to
the doomed institution of slavery and so mobilizing against it
American idealism and liberalism. "What Calhoun so greatly
feared has since come about," he wrote. "He erected a last
barrier against the progress of middle-class ideals—consolida-
tion in politics and standardization in society; against a uni-
versal cash-register evaluation of life: and the barrier was
blown to bits by the guns of the Civil War." For Parrington the
truly admirable Southern spokesman was Alexander H.
Stephens, a figure many other historians have found attrac-
tive. A gentle, selfless patriot, whose career exemplified
"the passionate love of freedom," Stephens was so highly
principled, as Parrington read his mind, that he refused to

9 III, 197–201; Arthur A. Ekirch, Jr., sees clearly this side of
Parrington in "Parrington and the Decline of American Liberal-
10 Eric F. Goldman, "J. Allen Smith," Pacific Northwest Quarterly,
35 (1944), 209, quoting a letter to Ross L. Finney, January 23,
1929.

Parrington was also doubtful whether the Constitution could
survive the changes that the near future would bring. "My own
view is that it will not, and that when the masters of society
think the time has come to throw it on the scrap heap they will
do it." To Howard Lee McBain, December 18, 1928.
sanction the use of extraconstitutional powers even in the urgent crisis of war. "He was of an earlier generation, instinctively hostile to all consolidation," and even though he failed to understand the economic basis of politics, he was worthy of a characterization which, coming from Parrington, was almost the ultimate accolade: the doctrine upon which his Constitutional View of the Late War between the States was based was "the doctrine which Paine and Jefferson derived from the French school, namely, that a constitutional compact is terminable."

Parrington’s feeling about the power of government was founded, it must be said, on a lifetime of hard experience during which he had rarely, if ever, seen authority acting in an enlightened, flexible, and humane way. He had moved from his Republican family into the tight little environment of Emporia College, whose windows (as he might have said) were certainly closed against the winds of doctrine, and where everything went on under the encompassing eyes of the Presbyterian Church and Major Hood; from there he had gone first to Harvard, which he found impenetrable, and then to Oklahoma, where he endured the ruthless cabal of the Methodists and political hacks, and finally to Washington, where he saw J. Allen Smith so shabbily treated. Arriving at maturity as a young agrarian in the era of Harrison and Cleveland, and finishing his book in the age of Harding and Coolidge, when the hopes of Progressivism seemed to have been blasted, he had seen little to suggest that somewhere a reliable center of power existed where the needs of the common man were a matter of vital concern. What experience taught him, and what the Jeffersonian tradition instilled, may have been confirmed in more self-conscious philosophical terms by J. Allen Smith, whose distrust of centralized government had led him to conclude by 1923 that "the only way to secure any real democracy in this country is to check the growth of federal power" and that democracy "is possible only where there is the largest practicable measure of local self-government." (On these grounds Smith refused to support a federal child-labor amendment.)

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2 Goldman, “J. Allen Smith,” 209. Cf. Woodrow Wilson in 1913: “If monopoly persists, monopoly will always sit at the helm of government. I do not expect to see monopoly restrain itself. If there are men in this country big enough to own the government of the United States, they are going to own it.” The New Freedom (1913), 286.
been "buried in the potter's field," and he was not confident or dogmatic enough to predict a better turning, though he had not given up every hope in the liberals and radicals of his own time. With his love of balance and proportion, his taste for elegance, his awakened secularism, and his affection for the ideals of humanitarianism and progress, Parrington belonged intellectually, as he fully realized, to the eighteenth century. For him the American Enlightenment remained the high point in national thought, and it was a warm compliment on his part, if wistfully conceived, to speak of Walt Whitman as "the afterglow of the Enlightenment"—as though Whitman represented not a beginning in poetry but a lovely echo in philosophy. Though he preferred the ebullience of the early optimistic reformers, he showed a certain gentle sympathy for the pessimism of men like Melville and Henry and Brooks Adams, men who, like himself, were caught on some receding wave of history: courageous, honest, sometimes rebellious minds who faced with poise the fatality of extinction. Whether later turnings of American history would have given him any comfort we cannot know, for he died suddenly during a trip to England in the summer of 1929. It seems a pity that he should have been denied some years more to finish his work and enjoy the fame that had come to him, and it would have been instructive to see him balance his humane ideals against his distrust of the consolidated state in the era of centralizing reform that was about to dawn.