

Reproduced with permission of the University of Chicago Press.
For personal, noncommercial use only.

BOOK REVIEWS

IDEAS IN AMERICA. By Howard Mumford Jones.
Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1944.
Pp. xi+304. \$3.00.

If preliminary studies in the history of American literature and culture had been adequate, and if he had not been interrupted by an excursion into academic administration as dean of the Graduate School of Harvard University, Professor Jones might have completed, as he explains in his Preface, the study of some intellectual, moral, and aesthetic currents in the United States which he projected almost twenty years ago. Instead he has published a collection of occasional essays and addresses written during the last ten years around the lacuna and on the way to the excursion. They are organized in three groups: (1) three essays, hortatory in character, setting forth the need for American literary history; (2) five essays, less discursive in argument and documented with quotations, illustrative of what the missing history of ideas would be like; and (3) five essays, more rhetorical in tone and lighter in intention, concerning the responsibilities of contemporary literature and the local *trahison des clercs*.

American literature may be as badly neglected in education and research as Professor Jones suggests in his first three essays, but even fifteen years ago his case sounded like the particular incidence of a common disease, and American culture and literature are certainly not neglected today (at least in time and effort devoted to them) in even the most conservative or the most progressive of American colleges. Professor Jones is nearer the basic problem in his discerning distinction of the history of literature and ideas from "scientific" history which "explains" them (p. 31), but the scholars of the new dispensation (enumerated on p. 38) seem as far from the ideas they propose to treat as the Marxists and Freudians Professor Jones discards.

The crux of Professor Jones's case is, therefore, the new method of cultural history he proposes. That method has two important tenets: a demand for a semantic approach to the meanings of crucial words and a confidence that the history of ideas in America will be intelligible only when our history is related to our Colonial

beginnings, as it was by Moses Coit Tyler, who emerges as the hero of Professor Jones's survey of historians of American literature. Adherence to the second tenet determines the selection of the five samples of intellectual history which constitute the second part of Professor Jones's book. Thus the thesis of "American Prose Style: 1700-1770" is that the shift to a plain style in American prose is directly correlated with a decline in theological controversy accompanied by a rise in reasonable toleration and with an abandonment of moralizing history for exact historical method. The weaknesses of the argument arise, first, from a limitation to the American scene and, second, from a selection of evidence even in that limited area. Much of the evidence is derived from statements about style made in ordination sermons, and long before 1700 the rhetoric of preaching made much of the plain and lucid style and the need of repeated assurance by the preacher that the manner was suited to subject matter and hearers; but, although the plain style was praised and used particularly in the ordination sermon, the sermon was, in the period 1700-1770, a notable instrument of the theological controversy. In like fashion the appearance of literal and exact history does not mark the disappearance of analogical and moralizing history: Jerome and Augustine inaugurated the two modes contemporaneously in Western Christianity; Erasmus and Luther revived them contemporaneously for the modern world; they can be found to coexist in the writings of our pre-Revolutionary forefathers.

The moral exhortations to the man of letters in the third group of essays reflects this view of the American past by rediscovering all things and therefore the solution of all problems in the microcosm of America (although Professor Jones would *not* ignore the rest of the world). In the first essay, "The American Scholar Again," Emerson's noble appeal to the American scholar becomes an exhortation that scholars save American culture from expropriation by the social sciences; in the second, "Nobility Wanted," American writers are urged to free themselves from the domination of Europe, since the influence of foreign realism and natu-

ralism has led them to tell the "truth" about the United States instead of reaffirming their faith in the democratic way of life; in the third the "melting-pot" is found to have reduced at last Anglo-Saxon domination among American authors and their characters; in the fourth it is announced with a show of paradox that Harvard and New England have become parts of the United States; and in the fifth tribalism is shown to be, not a foreign importation, but a growth from native American origins.

Professor Jones has an important message in his statement of the unsolved problem of literary and intellectual history, and he is correct in feeling (for all the interest in American studies) that a new analysis is needed particularly in American literature. But his positive suggestions suffer from two defects. He does not, first, recognize the method which he has substituted for the methods of the "scientific" history, and the "common-places" of the rhetorical method he employs are closer to the abandoned method than he supposes: he is fond, among others, of the commonplace of common-sense definition (which he uses when he decides, despite scholarly doubts, that the "Renaissance exists" and is what we mean by it [p. 141]), of the commonplace of differentiation (as in his enumeration of six senses of "Romanticism" [pp. 110-12]), and of the commonplace of whimsical contrariety (as when he destroys the "economic man" by speculating on his career and emotions [p. 163]). These methods have sometimes resulted in good literary history in the past, but they are hampered by Professor Jones's second postulate—that all our problems of literature, education, and intellectual development will be solved by increased attention to our circumstances and sources. It seems probable that we need a more subtle instrument of analysis than Professor Jones provides for the historical task and that, properly analyzed, even the uniqueness of America will be intelligible on a more general background of history and nature.

RICHARD MCKEON

University of Chicago