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THE AGE OF THE COMMON MAN

BY JOHN WILLIAM WARD

To speak of an age, or a man, as 'common' is, one might quickly think, to speak with a certain contempt. Yet, in the United States, the concept of the worth of the common man has been so intimately bound up in our thought with the value of democracy that the term has always carried an emotionally positive connotation with it. Because an American's inherited attitude toward the nature of society presumes the potential worth of the average man, he cannot say with Plato, 'How little does the common herd know of the nature of right and truth'. Even when dismayed by some of the consequences of the common man's rise to power in American society, the American historian has never been able to reject him with Plato's flat contempt.

The matter can be put succinctly by a look at the first work by an American historian to use the phrase, 'common man', in its title, Carl Russell Fish's *The Rise of the Common Man, 1830–1850* (1927). For Mr Fish as for other American historians, although not all use his precise dates, the age of the common man in American history is the period of the early nineteenth century, somewhere between Jefferson and the Civil War, roughly coincident with Andrew Jackson's coming to power and the formation of the Democratic party.

For the epigraph to his book, Mr Fish used the words of a contemporary of the period:

'Ours is a country,' wrote Calvin Colton in 1844, 'where men start from an humble origin . . . and where they can attain to the most elevated positions, or acquire

a large amount of wealth, according to the pursuits they elect for themselves. No exclusive privileges of birth, no entailment of estates, no civil or political disqualifications, stand in their path; but one has as good a chance as another, according to his talents, prudence or personal exertions. This is a country of self-made men, than which nothing better could be said of any state of society.'

But along with this praise of a society open to every man, Mr Fish chose also to put as a frontispiece to his book a reproduction of a political cartoon of the election of 1844, the very year of Colton's words. It shows a riot before 'Jefferson House', with a rudely dressed orator addressing his 'feller citizens' and a corrupt politician in the background dumping the contents of a ballot box out the window while a mob struggles back and forth in front of the polling place. In the left foreground of the cartoon, a top-hatted, frock-coated gentleman with a walking-stick complains, 'I have been a voter in this ward thirty years but since rowdyism rules the day . . . I must relinquish my privilege of Citizenship.'

Mr Fish's volume was part of the series, *A History of American Life*, edited by Arthur M. Schlesinger and Dixon Ryan Fox. In a foreword these two general editors made explicit the ambivalence toward the rise of the common man implicit in the juxtaposition of Mr Fish's epigraph and cartoon. 'Many readers,' wrote Schlesinger and Fox, 'will leave this volume with mixed feelings . . . it is clear that the older view, which saw in these years only a lowering of standards, must be offset by the picture . . . of a society which in many vital and enduring respects was leveling up as well as down.' Americans, including their historians, have had from Jackson's time to the present 'mixed feelings' about democracy and the common man it exalts. Was the rise of the common man the rise to power of a rude, unenlightened majority and the populistic rejection of intellect and the virtues of a social élite? Or was the rise of the common man a vindication of the worth of everyman and the rejection of the artificial distinctions of class and social status? The values

that each American historian has brought to his analysis of the early nineteenth century have determined, quite as much as the facts of what happened, his judgment of the age of the common man.

This is not to say that the facts did not offer themselves for evaluation. One could stress the moving simplicity of Jackson's unattended march on the day of his inauguration from his hotel to the steps of the Capitol and applaud the instincts of democracy; or, one could recoil from the rude crowd who trampled through the White House afterward, crowding the reception rooms and breaking glass until punch bowls were placed on the lawn to draw them out. Jackson's political philosophy lent itself to the same double interpretation. Before his election, presidents had risen through cabinet service to the presidency. Although he had prior political experience, Jackson was the first 'outsider' to become president, just as he was the first president close enough to the people to be known by a nickname. In his first annual message to the Congress, Jackson carefully rejected the notion that training and experience were primary requisites for election to high office. Long tenure led to the corrupt notion of considering office 'a species of property, and government rather as a means of promoting individual interests than as an instrument created solely for the service of the people'. So Jackson argued for 'that rotation [in office] which constitutes a leading principle in the republican creed', thus firmly establishing the spoils system in American national politics. Those who value experience and training in public life have used this declaration to point to the incompetent leadership which is a consequence of naive democratic theory. Although Jackson's action had the practical goal of providing financial support for the organization of a national political party, his rationale for his action was more subtle. His view of political power was largely negative; he believed that legislation should not obstruct the normal channels of individual enterprise and that, therefore, 'the duties of all public officers are, or at least admit of being made, so plain and simple that men of intelligence may readily qualify themselves for their performance'.

His attack on training for office and long experience in governmental affairs was that *they* led to corruption; the spoils system was offered as a species of reform. It was possible to say so only on the assumption of the competence of the common man and in the context of a society which saw little need for government anyway.

What the Jacksonian party in politics and Andrew Jackson in his own person dramatized, as I have tried to show in *Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age* (1955), was the widespread belief in early nineteenth-century America in the untutored wisdom of the common man whose uninhibited action would, guided by Providence, create the good society. What was acted out in politics and symbolized by Andrew Jackson found its historical voice almost immediately in the writings of George Bancroft, himself a Democratic partisan and Jacksonian politician. Bancroft wove all through his *History of the United States*, which he began in 1834, the bright thread of the Jacksonian belief that 'the many are more sagacious, more disinterested, more courageous than the few'. For Bancroft, the common people were the reservoir from which statesmen and poets and religious leaders drew their strength and truth. 'The spirit of the colonies,' he wrote in his general preface, 'demanded freedom from the beginning . . . Virginia first asserted the doctrine of popular sovereignty; . . . the people of Maryland constituted their own government; [the New England colonies] rested their legislation on the popular will.' Whatever distortion this did to American colonial history, it triumphantly vindicated popular democracy. Bancroft rejected the sceptical notion that 'the fortunes of a nation are . . . under the control of a blind destiny' and declared that the object of his *History* was 'to follow the steps by which a favoring Providence, calling our institutions into being, has conducted the country to its present happiness and glory'. God Himself, working through the course of history, was behind the common people.

Since Bancroft, American historians have been somewhat less ready to see the finger of God in the American past. They have offered more secular reasons for the rise of the common

man to social and political power: the influence of a continental environment, the absence of an articulated social structure, the economic openness of the society, or sheer political necessity. But they have all generally agreed that Andrew Jackson represented the aspirations of the average man of his time. Where they have differed is in deciding who this average man was. If the early nineteenth century is the age of the common man, what did Americans then have in common?

The writing of American history in the twentieth century has offered three different answers to this question. Although all three still have a continuing share in the historical debate on the meaning of our early national life, their major spokesmen can be arranged in rough chronological order. The first was Frederick Jackson Turner, who named the westward movement of the American people as their unique and characteristic historical experience and identified the common man of the early nineteenth century as the Western pioneer. Partially in reaction to Turner and partially in response to the conditions of modern American life, there emerged a second reading of the Jacksonian period as one whose ideology was provided by emergent labor groups and Eastern, urban reformers. The chief voice in this revisionary reading was Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., in *The Age of Jackson* (1945). Mr Schlesinger's book stimulated a host of new studies of the Jacksonian period which suggested that the common man of the early nineteenth century was neither a backwoodsman nor a disgruntled lower-class democrat, but an enterprising capitalist on the make. This third group is not so clearly marked by a single voice but its best statement is to be had in Richard Hofstadter's essay on Andrew Jackson in *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (1948).

Frederick Jackson Turner wrote his now famous essay, 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History', in 1893. From then until his death Turner argued his 'thesis' which, put bluntly at first, was that 'the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development'. Arguing a kind of ecological determinism, Turner asserted that:

> 'American development has exhibited not merely advance along a single line, but a return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line, and a new development for that area. American development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character. The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic Coast, it is the Great West.'

It is important to remember the period in which Turner wrote. History had, so to speak, caught up with the frontier. The American landscape now displayed factories and machines, great cities, recent immigrants who had never shared the shaping experience of pioneer life. 'Today,' Turner wrote in 1914, 'we are looking with a shock upon a changed world.' When he collected his major essays in *The Frontier in American History* (1921) it remained a question for Turner, as he put it in his preface, 'how large a part of the historic American ideals are to be carried over into that new age which is replacing the era of free lands and of measurable isolation by consolidated and complex industrial development and by increasing resemblances and connections between the New World and the Old'.

In Turner's dramatization of history, the Old World fell easily into the role of the evil and corrupt villain. The hero was, of course, the new man created by a new environment. 'The men of the "Western World",' said Turner in 'Contributions of the West to American Democracy' in 1903, 'turned their backs upon the Atlantic Ocean, and with a grim energy and self-reliance began to build up a society free from the dominance of ancient forms.' The result of their building was social and political democracy.

'Among the pioneers,' wrote Turner in an essay on 'Pioneer Ideals', 'one man was as good as his neighbor. He had the same chance; conditions were simple and free. Economic equality fostered political equality. An optimistic and buoyant belief in the worth of the plain people, a devout faith in man prevailed in the West. Democracy became almost the religion of the pioneer. He held with passionate devotion the idea that he was building under freedom a new society, based on self government, and for the welfare of the average man.'

Since Turner felt that the 'advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe' and that 'to study this advance is . . . to study the really American part of our history', he was forced into a curious dilemma. If the 'really' American part of our national experience was negative, that is, a movement away from civilized society to a wilderness landscape, then what social meaning did the hero of that action have? 'Other nations,' answered Turner, 'have been rich and prosperous and powerful. But the United States has believed that it had an original contribution to make to the history of society by the production of a self-determining, self-restrained, intelligent democracy.' The contribution of the frontier experience to the history of society was the self-willed, self-propelled American Democrat. 'In a word,' said Turner, using fourteen, 'the unchecked development of the individual was the significant product of this frontier democracy.' Andrew Jackson was its 'very personification'. Because the meaning of America was west, and because the meaning of America was democracy (which, when Turner paused to define it, largely meant freedom from restraint,) there was, obviously enough, only one place to look for the American Democrat. 'Here [in the Mississippi Valley], by the thirties,' wrote Turner, 'Jacksonian democracy flourished, strong in the faith of the intrinsic excellence of the common man, in his right to make his own place in the world, and in his capacity to share in government.'

But, as I have already suggested, Turner wrote at a

moment in American history when 'the unchecked development of the individual' seemed more a threat than a guarantee to the success of American society. Freedom from restraint had not established an ideal bucolic democracy, but rather increasing concentration of wealth and the demand for positive action by government on behalf of the common man of the Progressive period to maintain what Herbert Croly called the 'promise' of American life. 'Democracy and capitalistic development,' remarked Turner, 'did not seem antagonistic' in the earlier period, but they did seem so at the turn of the century. And all through Turner's celebration of the pioneer democrat there sounds a submerged note of disapproval. As well as the 'simplicity of primitive conditions', the frontier meant 'savagery' and the disintegration of civilization; if the frontier developed 'stalwart and rugged qualities', it also gave rise to 'all the manifest evils that follow from the lack of a highly developed civic spirit'; if the frontiersman was assertive and optimistic, he was also 'naive'. But although he saw all the weaknesses of the ideal type he had constructed, Turner could never believe that it would be anything but a terrible mistake if Americans deserted the ideals of the common man of frontier America and turned 'to some Old World discipline of socialism or plutocracy, or despotic rule, whether by class or dictator'.

Turner could never decide if the twin American ideals of social equality and individual freedom could survive the passing of the frontier; if, in a more complex age, one might not have to give way to the other. Nor did he know if the frontier experience had not shaped a basic antipathy in the American character to the training and excellence which a new age demanded. But he never doubted that the American Democrat had, like some mythic Antaeus, found his strength in contact with the earth and that what Americans had historically in common was this brief escape from the complexity of civilization to the rude good fellowship of the frontier. Writing when escape was no longer possible, he put both his nostalgia and his fear in two sentences: 'It is in the Middle West that society has formed on lines least like those of Europe.

It is here, if anywhere, that American democracy will make its stand against the tendency to adjust to a European type.'

Turner's attempt to find in the frontier experience some unique element which differentiated America from Europe led him, later historians thought, to neglect forces which were basic to the development of American society. During the depths of the depression, in an article in the liberal *Nation* magazine, the historian, Louis M. Hacker, flatly asserted that 'only by a study of the origins and growth of American capitalism and imperialism can we obtain insight into the nature and the complexity of the problems confronting us today'. Hacker felt that Turner had turned America's eyes inward 'at exactly the time when all trained eyes should have been on events going on' in the international world and named Turner and his followers as 'the fabricators of a tradition which is not only fictitious but also to a very large extent positively harmful'.[1]

Clearly, Turner's reading of the American experience offered little help to an industrial and capitalistic society in a moment of crisis. If the past reveals itself from the perspective of the present, then it is understandable that a new reading of the age of the common man should have emerged in response to a heightened awareness of what the United States had become. So it was that Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., began his prize-winning and immensely popular *The Age of Jackson* with the words: 'The world crisis has given new urgency to the question of the "meaning" of democracy. If democracy is indeed to be the hope of the future, we know now that we must have its lineaments clearly in mind.' Quoting Franklin D. Roosevelt to establish the relevance of the 'Arcadian simplicity' of Jackson's time to the problems of the present, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., suggested that Jacksonian democracy was 'not so pat a case' as some have thought of Western influence in American government and put at the front of his book the words of George Bancroft that 'the feud between the capitalist and the laborer, the house of Have and the house of Want, is as old as social union'.

The Age of Jackson insisted that 'the East remained the

[1] *Nation*, CXXXVII (26 July 1933), p. 108.

source of the effective expression of Jacksonian radicalism' because 'the East simply had the consistent and bitter experience which alone could serve as the crucible of radicalism'. In arguing that 'the demand for economic equality is generally born out of conditions of social inequality', Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., emphasized the importance of Eastern intellectuals and labor reformers in providing an ideology which gave coherence to the democratic impulses of the common man of the early nineteenth century.

The central thesis of *The Age of Jackson* had been suggested many years before by the author's father, Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., in an essay on 'The Significance of Jacksonian Democracy', in *New Viewpoints in American History* (1922). Although the first section of his essay was largely a summary of the Turnerian view of Jacksonian Democracy, in the second section the elder Schlesinger drew attention to the fact that 'while democracy was working out its destiny in the forests of the Mississippi Valley, the men left behind in the eastern cities were engaging in a struggle to establish conditions of equality and social well-being adapted to their special circumstances'. Himself a historian of the rise of the city in American life, Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., felt that for a full understanding of the Jacksonian democratic movement 'it is necessary to consider the changed circumstances of life of the common man in the new industrial centers of the East since the opening years of the nineteenth century'. Turner himself, of course, had not been blind to the facts of labor unrest and the criticisms of urban intellectuals in the early nineteenth century, but with his predisposition to associate democracy with the West he generally wrote as if the East were responding to breezes blowing off the broad and open prairies.

In the elder Schlesinger's essay, the common man of the Mississippi Valley and the common man of eastern industrialism stood uneasily side by side. But in the younger Schlesinger's book the common man turned out to be nearly everyone who was not a business man. 'The irrepressible conflict of capitalism,' he wrote, has been 'the struggle on the part of the business community to dominate the state, and on

the part of the rest of society, under the leadership of "liberals", to check the political ambitions of business.' The leadership of the liberals was quite as important as the rest of society and it was, therefore, much easier for Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., to find a place in the army of the common man for the intellectual, even if at the head of the march, than it was for Turner for whom feelings of equality and individual worth were more the promptings of the heart than the reasons of the head.

Although *The Age of Jackson* concluded with a damning indictment of the political incapacity of the American business community and although 'capitalism' and 'class' echoed through its pages, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., was careful to keep the Jacksonians—and Americans—free from any leanings toward socialism. If, as to some critics it often seemed, *The Age of Jackson* was an historical mandate for the age of Roosevelt, what it asserted as common to American democratic experience was a resourceful, pragmatic hostility to power in the hands of any class. Further, written during the incumbency of a greatly popular president, it assumed, perhaps too readily, an affinity between the leadership of liberal intellectuals and the emotions of the common man.

One of the great and undeniable virtues of *The Age of Jackson* was the heuristic value it had for other American historians. For a period which had come to be treated in terms of stale clichés, such as, for example, 'the age of the common man', *The Age of Jackson*, written with vigor and an overriding sense of purpose, demanded a new look. It came soon enough. Bray Hammond, a secretary of the Federal Reserve Board, who had long been at work on what was to be a magistral analysis of *Banks and Politics in America from the Revolution to the Civil War* (1957), rejected Schlesinger's thesis that the Jacksonians had any animus toward business. Quite the contrary. The early nineteenth century was not an age of 'triumphant liberalism', asserted Mr Hammond; 'it was as much or more an age of 'triumphant exploitation'.[1] The common man was really an eager entrepreneur.

[1] 'Jackson, Biddle, and the Bank of the United States', *Journal of Economic History*, VII (May 1947), pp. 1–23.

Bray Hammond was most irritated by the argument of *The Age of Jackson* that the Jacksonian attack on the U.S. Bank was thought out and promoted by reformers and labor groups. He showed that it was as much an attack by the business community, eager for easy credit and restive under the restraints of an institution which performed many of the controls we now associate with a central bank. 'The sober pace of eighteenth-century business,' he wrote, 'was giving way, on the wave of *laisser faire* and the Industrial Revolution, to a democratic passion to get rich quick—an ambition which America seemed designed by Providence to promote.' While Mr Hammond assailed the ideology that Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., had ascribed to the Jacksonian period, other historians looked more closely at the character of the labor groups in the period and found them populated not by incipient proletariats but by skilled craftsmen, many of them masters themselves, and by a liberal sprinkling of professional men. Unskilled laborers and factory operators were rarely involved and the program of these movements was designed more to preserve business opportunity than to attack business itself.

The view of the common man of the early nineteenth century as a nascent entrepreneur had been adumbrated as long ago as Henry Adams's remark in his great history that each man knew that 'every stroke of his axe and hoe made him a capitalist, and gentlemen of his children'. One of the few thorough-going Marxists in American historical writing, Algie M. Simons, had fully developed the thesis in 1911 in *Social Forces in American History*. 'The rampant individualism of young competitive capitalism,' said Simons, 'determined the *Zeitgeist* of the period.' For Simons, the psychology of the 'rising bourgeoisie' dominated both the labor movement and the frontier and he described Jacksonian democracy in one telling phrase, 'the democracy of expectant capitalists'. By 1940, Louis M. Hacker could describe not only the age of Jackson but the main stream of American history as dominated by 'a constantly recurrent petty-bourgeois strain. . . . There is no country in modern times which can come near matching the successes achieved in the United States by the

petty-bourgeois political ideas and leadership of Jeffersonianism, Jacksonianism, a part of the original Radical Republicanism, Populism and La Follette Progressivism.'[1]

From the perspective of the twentieth century, American history has seemed to become more and more a conservative affair. Whether viewed by historians of the left who have a certain distaste for the historically necessary petty bourgeois, or by historians of the right who esteem the classic middle-class ideals of equality before the law and protection of property, the Jacksonian period has been affected by this shift in emphasis. 'Democracy' and 'reform' have been more carefully defined in the context of their times. So the major spokesman today for the entrepreneurial thesis, Richard Hofstadter, could conclude that:

> 'the Jacksonian movement grew out of expanding opportunities and a common desire to enlarge these opportunities still further. . . . It is commonly recognized in American historical folklore that the Jackson movement was a phase in the expansion of democracy, but it is too little recognized that it was also a phase in the expansion of liberated capitalism . . . in the Jacksonian period the democratic upsurge was closely linked to the ambitions of the small capitalist.'[2]

Clearly enough, the common man of the early nineteenth century cannot be at one and the same time a backwoods farmer, an Eastern worker, and an American capitalist. Recently, an American scholar reviewing a book on the Jacksonian period suggested that students of the time are now in the position of the blind men each trying to describe an elephant by touching only one part of the beast. It may be that historians have tried to name an animal which never

[1] *The Triumph of American Capitalism: The Development of Forces in American History to the End of the Nineteenth Century* (Simon and Schuster, 1940), p. 15.

[2] 'Andrew Jackson and the Rise of Liberal Capitalism', *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), p. 55.

existed in the garden of America. But two recent books suggest approaches toward order among the conflicting theories we now have. One, Marvin Meyers, *The Jacksonian Persuasion: Politics and Belief* (1957), is a brilliant intellectual portrait of the broad pattern of Jacksonian ideas; the other, Lee Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case* (1961), is a painstaking case-study of the social, ethnic, religious, and economic patterns of Jacksonian support in the crucial state of New York. Each, then, attacks the problem from opposite ends; one being a broad study of ideals, the other a carefully documented study of who was who in the movement in one state. Both point to different but related needs: a new general interpretation of the early nineteenth century as well as more particular studies on which valid general theories must rest.

Mr Meyers presents us with a portrait of an age deeply divided, torn between the ideal of the Old Republic of little government and stoic self-sufficiency and the material lures of a new society of acquisitive capitalism. In Mr Meyers's hands, politics becomes a language of moral gesture; the language is public, but the meaning is inner, the realm of 'impalpable motives, feelings, perceptions' which lie beneath the external act. The result is a suggestive probing into the mind of the Jacksonian period. But as one stands back from it, *The Jacksonian Persuasion* presents one large problem. Mr Meyers writes as if the division were general, as if all Americans shared in the ambivalence he attributes to his ideal 'venturous conservative'. Perhaps. No government meant individual self-sufficiency but it also meant freedom to exploit opportunity and the Jacksonian program could serve both interests. The conflict that Mr Meyers discerns may have been social rather than individual; he may be dealing with two groups in society rather than an ambivalence in Americans generally. Having said this, however, one must admit that the public record of the American mind in the Jacksonian period bears out what Mr Meyers says. The common man of the period may at one and the same time have been deeply torn between opposite views of the nature of his experience.

The thrust of Mr Benson's book is forecast in a line from William Blake which he gives us at the beginning: 'He who would do good to another must do it in Minute Particulars.' So Mr Benson proceeds to do good to historians of the Jacksonian period by doing a minute analysis of one crucial state, New York. Summary does little justice to the elaborate analysis of evidence that Mr Benson puts forth, but, broadly, he concludes that the concept of 'Jacksonian Democracy' has little relevance when tested in New York because the sources of leadership, the voting support, and the persuasive metaphors were the same for both major political parties. Mr Benson concludes that in New York the struggle was mainly over who held office and was only secondarily over final goals. 'After 1815, not only in politics but in all spheres of American life, egalitarianism challenged elitism and, in most spheres and places, egalitarianism won.' If we translate Mr Benson's 'ism' back into the language we have been using, then his detailed study confirms the traditional notion that this was the age of the common man. Which only proves that a cliché must have some truth in it to become one.

Mr Benson's book is an argument for the need of a more diligent empiricism. His point is well taken. As one reviews the literature, one is struck by the suspicion that historians have spent their time taking in each other's washing and running it through a different mangle. Despite all the attention paid to aspects of the age of the common man, an astonishing amount still needs to be known. For example, until only recently the notion prevailed that it was a popular democratic expansion of the suffrage that swept Jackson into office; Richard P. McCormick has demonstrated the falsity of this stereotype.[1] Clearly, as Mr Benson insists, we need local studies which use more sophisticated analyses, which look for patterns of multiple causation rather than single factors, whether they be of the frontier, the worker, or the entrepreneur.

But the point of diminishing returns will quickly arrive if historians of the age of the common man in America do not

[1] 'New Perspectives on Jacksonian Politics', *American Historical Review*, LXV (January 1960), pp. 288–301.

also have some broad hypothesis in which their facts will have some meaning. What students of the American past mostly need at present is a self-conscious theory of culture which will enable them to win their way through to a description of the patterns that give coherence to particular events. For example, Americans of the time, as well as foreign visitors, noted again and again the ideological affinity between Jacksonian democracy and the various species of revivalistic religion so prominent in the period. Yet no one has yet worked out the details of that affinity and tested to what degree egalitarianism in religion carried over into social preferences by studying the political and economic behavior of regions most affected by evangelical religion.

At the same time, the rise of literary romanticism with its emphasis upon the individual, the subjectivity of experience, the validity of the emotions and the worth of the lowly and primitive obviously was germane to an emphasis on the intrinsic worth of the common man. But literature and politics exist largely in separate spheres in the writings of American historians. Twenty years ago, F. O. Matthiessen, in the preface to *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*, describing the kind of book he was not writing, said that 'another notable book could concentrate on how discerning an interpretation our great authors gave of the economic and social forces of the time. The orientation of such a book would not be with the religious and philosophical ramifications of the transcendental movement so much as with its voicing of fresh aspirations for the rise of the common man.' We do not yet have that book or that kind of cultural history in American scholarship. So what we need most is the imaginative historian who will throw the past into shape and disclose what was the common pattern of the age we have for so long now known simply as common.

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