

**THE AMERICAN MIND
AND
AMERICAN IDEALISM**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649424825

The American Mind and American Idealism by Bliss Perry

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The Riverside Literature Series

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BY

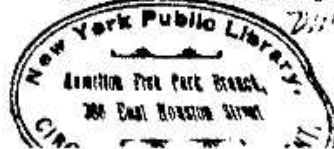
BLISS PERRY

PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH LITERATURE
HARVARD UNIVERSITY



BOSTON NEW YORK CHICAGO
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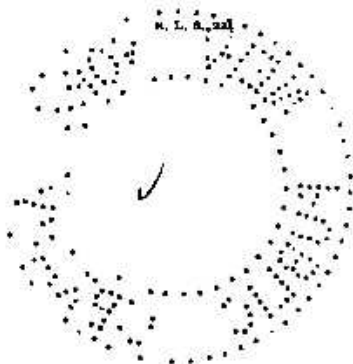
The Riverside Press, Cambridge





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M. L. 8, 21



The Riverside Press
CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS
U. S. A.

Introduction

BY ADA L. F. SNELL

AN editorial in the *Springfield Republican* points out that the low standard of American writing is due, not to any lack of technical training, but to minds made flabby by "soft" courses and "lazy trifling with current fiction." Given minds of this sort, no amount of technical discipline will produce good writing; for, "important as it is, and to be encouraged in every way, formal instruction in the art of writing must always be secondary to education for wide culture and vigorous thinking. Good writing is mainly a matter of robust intellectual appetite and digestion employed upon matters that produce self-expression." With the hope that this intellectual spirit may, to some extent, be cultivated by the study of virile modern writers, these *Riverside Essays* have been selected. It is believed that the student may be more effectively trained in the art of writing by contact with

[v]

INTRODUCTION

material, firmly thought out and masterfully expressed, than by rhetorical precept. Good reading will enable him to discover for himself those fundamental laws of form which every good writer obeys; and obeys because they simply formulate the mind's way of working when it works well. Beatrice says in the *Paradiso*, "All things whatsoever have order among themselves, and this is the form which makes the universe like to God." Form, then, in Dante's universe, as in writing, is order. And since no right sense of the significance of order can be developed by mere "extracts," the whole composition of a writer should be given the student for consideration. Only thus can he appreciate that "the workman hath in his heart a purpose." Moreover, the student who masters an essay in all its logical setting forth of an idea toughens his mind "to grapple with hard books and to get pleasure from conquering them whether he enjoys them or not." And by means of this grappling "his intelligence can be got actively at work striking out ideas and setting them in order." With the twofold purpose, therefore, of developing in the student through good reading both a sense of form and also

INTRODUCTION

mental power, the material in the *Riverside Essays* has been selected.

The first number, here presented, is by Bliss Perry, professor of English Literature at Harvard. Professor Perry's environment and training have been almost wholly academic. He was born in the college town of Williamstown, and is the son of a professor. A graduate of Williams College, he studied further at the universities of Berlin and Strassburg. Professor Perry taught English at Williams and Princeton, was for several years editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, and in 1909 was Harvard lecturer at the University of Paris. Professor Perry's writing is also largely academic in spirit. *A Study of Prose Fiction* is known to all students. *The Amateur Spirit* delightfully describes the life of a college professor, and tells of such gentle academic pastimes as fishing with a worm. *The Park Street Papers*, and indeed all of Professor Perry's writing, is characterized by a genial scholarship. His latest book, *The American Mind*, from which the two essays here reprinted are chosen, is plainly the result of collegiate pursuits. The lectures which constitute the volume are, as the author states in the pre-

INTRODUCTION

face, the E. T. Earl Lectures for 1912 at the Pacific Theological Seminary, Berkeley, California.

The purpose of *The American Mind* is to define and interpret American literature as it reflects the characteristic qualities of the American. In his first lecture, *Race, Nation, and Book*, Professor Perry declares that dogmatic brandings of racial and national traits on a national literature are to be made with reservations. For example, Keats belongs to no time and Edgar Allan Poe to no place. The author further questions the existence of a truly national art anywhere; that is, an art "which conveys a trustworthy and adequate expression of the national temper as a whole." All our deductions concerning Japan, based upon the Japanese vases and prints, were "smashed to pieces by the Russo-Japanese War." That literature does not express the character of a nation is due to the fact that such expression requires a knowledge of form such as is possessed only by the poet. Lacking a poet, racial experience and national emotions are unrecorded. The scholars of the Renaissance, recognizing this fact, avowed they needed schoolmasters, and were in the right; for

INTRODUCTION

"no one can paint or compose by nature. One must slowly master an art of expression." Literature demands "not merely personal distinction and power, not merely some uncommon height or depth of capacity and insight, but a purely artistic training, which in the very nature of the case is rare." A nation, therefore, is not necessarily without ideas and emotions simply because no poet has arisen to voice them in song. Notwithstanding this, in the literature which a nation has produced, the task of the critic is to find the national bent of mind. This Professor Perry attempts to do in *The American Mind*, and by such an analysis prepares the reader to understand the elements which make a book truly American.

Briefly summarized, the characteristics of the American are belief in the institutions of his country, confidence in his powers, recklessness, love of oratory, and wonderful energy. "We are a nation of immigrants, a digging, hewing, building, breeding, bettering race, of mixed blood and varying creeds, but of fundamental faith in the wages of going on; a race compounded of materials crude but potent; raw, but with blood that is red and bones that are