

His philosophy is pervaded by an insistence which is, I think, entirely without justification, that the universe, and every sort of thing in it, moves from the simple and homogeneous to the complex and heterogeneous. An unwary man obsessed with that idea would be very likely to assume without consideration that men were less specialised in a barbaric state of society than they are to-day. I think I have given reasons for believing that the reverse of this is nearer the truth.

IS THERE A PEOPLE?

Of all the great personifications that have dominated the mind of man, the greatest, the most marvellous, the most impossible and the most incredible, is surely the People, that impalpable monster to which the world has consecrated its political institutions for the last hundred years.

It is doubtful now whether this stupendous superstition has reached its grand climacteric, and there can be little or no dispute that it is destined to play a prominent part in the history of mankind for many years to come. There is a practical as well as a philosophical interest, therefore, in a note or so upon the attributes of this legendary being. I write "legendary," but thereby I display myself a sceptic. To a very

large number of people the People is one of the profoundest realities in life. They believe--what exactly do they believe about the people?

When they speak of the People they certainly mean something more than the whole mass of individuals in a country lumped together. That is the people, a mere varied aggregation of persons, moved by no common motive, a complex interplay. The People, as the believer understands the word, is something more mysterious than that. The People is something that overrides and is added to the individualities that make up the people. It is, as it were, itself an individuality of a higher order--as indeed, its capital "P" displays. It has a will of its own which is not the will of any particular person in it, it has a power of purpose and judgment of a superior sort. It is supposed to be the underlying reality of all national life and the real seat of all public religious emotion. Unfortunately, it lacks powers of expression, and so there is need of rulers and interpreters. If they express it well in law and fact, in book and song, they prosper under its mysterious approval; if they do not, it revolts or forgets or does something else of an equally annihilatory sort. That, briefly, is the idea of the People. My modest thesis is that there exists nothing of the sort, that the world of men is entirely made up of the individuals that compose it, and that the collective action is just the algebraic sum of all individual actions.

How far the opposite opinion may go, one must talk to intelligent Americans or read the contemporary literature of the first French Revolution to understand. I find, for example, so typical a young

American as the late Frank Norris roundly asserting that it is the People to whom we are to ascribe the triumphant emergence of the name of Shakespeare from the ruck of his contemporaries and the passage in which this assertion is made is fairly representative of the general expression of this sort of mysticism. "One must keep one's faith in the People--the Plain People, the Burgesses, the Grocers--else of all men the artists are most miserable and their teachings vain. Let us admit and concede that this belief is ever so sorely tried at times.... But in the end, and at last, they will listen to the true note and discriminate between it and the false." And then he resorts to italics to emphasise: "In the last analysis the People are always right."

And it was that still more typical American, Abraham Lincoln, who declared his equal confidence in the political wisdom of this collective being. "You can fool all the people some of the time and some of the people all the time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time." The thing is in the very opening words of the American Constitution, and Theodore Parker calls it "the American idea" and pitches a still higher note: "A government of all the people, by all the people, for all the people; a government of all the principles of eternal justice, the unchanging law of God."

It is unavoidable that a collective wisdom distinct from any individual and personal one is intended in these passages. Mr. Norris, for example, never figured to himself a great wave of critical discrimination sweeping through the ranks of the various provision trades and a

multitude of simple, plain burgesses preferring Shakespeare and setting Marlowe aside. Such a particularisation of his statement would have at once reduced it to absurdity. Nor does any American see the people particularised in that way. They believe in the People one and indivisible, a simple, mystical being, which pervades and dominates the community and determines its final collective consequences.

Now upon the belief that there is a People rests a large part of the political organisation of the modern world. The idea was one of the chief fruits of the speculations of the eighteenth century, and the American Constitution is its most perfect expression. One turns, therefore, inevitably to the American instance, not because it is the only one, but because there is the thing in its least complicated form. We have there an almost exactly logical realisation of this belief. The whole political machine is designed and expressed to register the People's will, literature is entirely rewarded and controlled by the effectual suffrages of the bookseller's counter, science (until private endowment intervened) was in the hands of the State Legislatures, and religion the concern of the voluntary congregations.

On the assumption that there is a People there could be no better state of affairs. You and I and everyone, except for a vote or a book, or a service now and then, can go about our business, you to your grocery and I to mine, and the direction of the general interests rests safe in the People's hands. Now that is by no means a caricature of the attitude of mind of many educated Americans. You find they have little or nothing to

do with actual politics, and are inclined to regard the professional politician with a certain contempt; they trouble their heads hardly at all about literature, and they contemplate the general religious condition of the population with absolute unconcern. It is not that they are unpatriotic or morally trivial that they stand thus disengaged; it is that they have a fatalistic belief in this higher power. Whatever troubles and abuses may arise they have an absolute faith that "in the last analysis" the People will get it right.

And now suppose that I am right and that there is no People! Suppose that the crowd is really no more than a crowd, a vast miscellaneous confusion of persons which grows more miscellaneous every year. Suppose this conception of the People arose out of a sentimental idealisation, Rousseau fashion, of the ancient homogeneous peasant class--a class that is rapidly being swept out of existence by modern industrial developments--and that whatever slender basis of fact it had in the past is now altogether gone. What consequences may be expected?

It does not follow that because the object of your reverence is a dead word you will get no oracles from the shrine. If the sacred People remains impassive, inarticulate, non-existent, there are always the keepers of the shrine who will oblige. Professional politicians, venal and violent men, will take over the derelict political control, people who live by the book trade will alone have a care for letters, research and learning will be subordinated to political expediency, and a great development of noisily competitive religious enterprises will take the

place of any common religious formula. There will commence a secular decline in the quality of public thought, emotion and activity. There will be no arrest or remedy for this state of affairs so long as that superstitious faith in the People as inevitably right "in the last analysis" remains. And if my supposition is correct, it should be possible to find in the United States, where faith in the people is indisputably dominant, some such evidence of the error of this faith. Is there?

I write as one that listens from afar. But there come reports of legislative and administrative corruption, of organised public blackmail, that do seem to carry out my thesis. One thinks of Edgar Allan Poe, who dreamt of founding a distinctive American literature, drugged and killed almost as it were symbolically, amid electioneering and nearly lied out of all posthumous respect by that scoundrel Griswold; one thinks of State Universities that are no more than mints for bogus degrees; one thinks of "Science" Christianity and Zion City. These things are quite insufficient for a Q.E.D., but I submit they favour my proposition.

Suppose there is no People at all, but only enormous, differentiating millions of men. All sorts of widely accepted generalisations will collapse if that foundation is withdrawn. I submit it as worth considering.