

# Randolph Silliman Bourne (1886-1918) and His Vision of America: A Pilot Study

By JOHN A. MOREAU\*

\* \* \*

That which was crooked  
Straightened.  
That which was defeated  
Joined  
With that which was  
Victorious.  
And that which was beautiful  
Blended  
With that which was ill-planned.  
To be separated  
And made crooked  
Or straight  
Again.  
(Theodore Dreiser-1918)<sup>1</sup>

**R**ANDOLPH BOURNE and Hope were one. But both the man and the felicitous memory of him have long been dead, save to a scant clique which prowls the dim passageways and mute

---

\*John A. Moreau is a journalist and a native of Glen Ridge, N. J. He is first-place winner in the graduate division. Holder of a B.S.J. from Northwestern in 1960 and an M.A. from Fordham in 1962, he is doing a Ph.D. dissertation at the University on Bourne.

1. "Appearance and Reality," *Twice a Year*, 1 (Fall-Winter 1938), 56. When Dreiser learned Bourne might die, he sent this poem to Bourne, but it had been misdirected. It was returned to Dreiser unopened after Bourne had died. This particularly grieved Dreiser because in the same envelope he sent Bourne a letter in which he tried to sum up how he felt about Bourne, and what Bourne had meant to him. Dreiser in 1941 received the first Randolph Bourne Memorial Award established by the League of American Writers, then a strongly pacifist group and strongly noninterventionist, presented biennially to the American writer who had performed the most distinguished service for culture and peace.

caverns of American civilization. In his time, however, Randolph Bourne was an inspirer of men and a leading intellectual. In a brief seven-year career he espoused a radiantly idealistic concept of youth and its role in American civilization. By the force and freshness of his observation and criticism he put himself in the vanguard of reformers and theorists of American education. He insisted on the uniqueness of American culture and posited pragmatic tests which should be applied to it. With deep feeling Bourne probed unceasingly for the implications of his notion of the promise of American life, and toward the end of his life he stood almost alone in strong condemnation of his country's participation in World War I. At the same time, he roundly lashed American intellectuals who supported the war. So uncompromising and singular was his attack that by 1918 he was isolated from many friends, and almost completely frustrated in seeking an outlet for his unpopular and disturbing views.

The 1918 influenza epidemic confounded Bourne's weak, grotesque body, and he died quietly in Greenwich Village, leaving a heritage which many at the time thought imperishable. While Bourne at his death was painfully out of harmony with national sentiment, he left a modest corps of admirers, some of whom loved him dearly, many of whom had taken strength from his mind. It is remarkable that he ever had strength to give.

Bourne was the victim of what he himself described with that disarming frankness so characteristic of his work as a "terribly messy birth."<sup>2</sup> The doctor had been a quack. He disfigured Bourne's face, setting his mouth permanently askew. Then when Bourne was four, spinal tuberculosis deformed him, dwarfed him, and made him a hunchback. His twisted face was set off by a misshapen left ear.<sup>3</sup> Always breathing hard and audibly, he made his way on New York City streets and along New England lanes on spindly little legs which set his torso swaying, thus conveying the impression of an impending paroxysm. An eerie figure garbed habitually in a soft dark hat and a black cape which he had brought back from Europe, he at first caused people to shrink from him in repulsion. But when the subtle influence of his vibrant eyes, the lucidity of his mind as

2. Van Wyck Brooks, *Fenollosa and His Circle—With Other Essays in Biography* (New York, 1962), 260.

3. *Ibid.* Explanations vary as to the cause of Bourne's misfortune. Brooks' is chosen because he, among the writers on Bourne, knew him best. There is an unfounded story to this day in Bourne's hometown that he was dropped and injured when an infant. A widely held wrong impression was that Bourne was a cripple. He was not. Also see Louis Filler, *Randolph Bourne* (Washington, D.C., 1943), 8.

expressed in the attractiveness of his speech, and the strength of his fine pianist's hands did their work, his ugliness vanished. He was, as Theodore Dreiser said, a major mind encased in a minor body.

Randolph was born in the New York City suburb of Bloomfield, N.J. Then a town of 10,000, Bloomfield had strong and deep roots dating from the colonial era. Then as today, the focus of community life was the charming green. Next to it or near it were most of the town's main institutions—churches, schools, the business district. The Bourne family lived near the green, and was part of the local aristocracy. The forebears of Bourne's mother had come to the New World in 1628. From an uncle, Col. William Silliman, a Union officer killed in the Civil War, Bourne took his middle name. Like most Bournes, his father was a professional man. The Bournes were stridently Presbyterian and Calvinistic, an early formation against which Bourne later rebelled. Of his halting and unsuccessful attempts to join in play with his brother, two sisters and other children, Bourne later wrote:

It never used to occur to me that my failures and lack of skill were due to circumstances beyond my control, but I would always impute them, in consequence of my rigid Calvinistic bringing-up, I suppose, to some moral weakness of my own.<sup>4</sup>

By the time Randolph was graduated from Bloomfield High School, his father had died, and the family was pressed financially. Bourne could not go to college. For six frustrating years, he did secretarial work, drudged in the office of a piano roller maker, picked up small sums as an accompanist for a voice teacher with studios above Carnegie Hall, and, when compelled, he lived off his family. These years were no more idle, however, than had been his earlier youth. For he continued to devour books. Out of desperation and on the prompting of an acquaintance, Bourne successfully applied for a Columbia University scholarship. He enrolled in 1909 at the age of twenty-three.

The effect on Bourne was exhilarating, and from the beginning his career at Morningside Heights was a success. Bourne loved literature, but a distaste for the tradition-bound presentation at Columbia and for what he felt were the archaic and airless preferences of the department—for Bourne was a modernist in his literary tastes—turned him irrevocably against ancient and modern classics. Most of his university career he studied history and sociology, while setting

---

4. *Youth and Life* (Boston, 1913), 343.

his own pace in literature. Most important, the Columbia experience gave Bourne self-respect.

His academic distinction also was adorned by his rising eventually to the editorship of the *Columbia University Monthly*, an undergraduate literary journal; the publication, beginning in 1911, of a series of articles in the *Atlantic Monthly* which in 1913 were collected in a volume entitled *Youth and Life*; and his popularity among student intellectuals and many professors. Indeed, John Dewey and Charles Beard were his personal friends as well as his mentors, and it was under Dewey that Bourne did his master's thesis. The university had financed his graduate work, and after completion of his master's degree in 1913, Bourne received a coveted grant for a year of European travel.<sup>5</sup>

Eager to find his intellectual and creative niche, Bourne upon his return joined the *New Republic* shortly before it began publishing. While he specialized in education, his articles and reviews ranged over the arts and social sciences—from city planning and Tolstoi, to war and love. But when the *New Republic* supported Wilson's war policy, Bourne feuded with its editors. By mid-1917 Bourne had been ostracized. He then collaborated with Waldo Frank, the critic James Oppenheim, and Van Wyck Brooks in starting a pungent review, the *Seven Arts*. Although John Reed and editor Oppenheim were writing strong pacifist pieces for the *Seven Arts*, it was Bourne's work which caused the backer to withdraw support. The magazine folded. And by 1918 the *Dial*, which already had published several of Bourne's notable anti-war essays, had ceased running anything but his book reviews.

Meantime in these years Bourne became acquainted with major writers of the day. A rare breed of celebrity himself, Tuesday afternoon tea at his flat was a coveted experience as were his dinner parties and the witty and urbane conversations continuing after the meal and far into the night. These years were punctuated with many warm acquaintances and deep friendships he cultivated. For Bourne craved friendship. "My friends," he said in a sensitive essay entitled "The Excitement of Friendship," "I can say with truth, since I have no other treasure, are my fortune."<sup>6</sup> His friends had done much to help and encourage Bourne, and in his last months he lived

5. This was the Gilder Fellowship. His report to the trustees was in the form of a fine essay he called "Impressions of Europe: 1913-1914" published in the *Columbia University Quarterly* for March 1915, and included in Van Wyck Brooks (ed.), *The History of a Literary Radical & Other Papers by Randolph Bourne* (New York, 1956).

6. *Youth*, 135.

on their charity. Friends could not, however, stay an indifferent disease. Bourne died Dec. 22, 1918, after a three-day illness in a grubby flat on West 8th Street in the Village. He was thirty-two. How had this gentle creature, the leader, inspirer, stimulator and antagonist of so many of his articulate contemporaries looked at life? What was Bourne's world view?

Bourne's credo was socialism in a sense not necessarily related to Marxism, although Bourne was conscious of and commented on class conflict. He looked to collectivism for a guarantee of individual freedom and responsibility *vis-a-vis* the nation's newer and ever more involved conditions. "Socialist" for Bourne, however, was too exclusively political. He usually called himself a radical, for he wanted a radicalism which ran the whole of American culture, of which economics and politics were but a part. Socialism for Bourne was the revolt against individualism in society and against the ivory tower in literature and art.<sup>7</sup> To be for collectivism as a social method was for him to oppose, for example, industrialism where it had become corrosive. He yearned for a society democratic in economics, but aristocratic in thought, that is, a coalition of thinkers and workers. At the same time, however, he wanted a form of intellectual democracy in which ideas stood on their own merits, not on precedent or aristocratic sentiment. "We cannot afford in this twentieth century," Bourne wrote, "to let men inflict their own depraved artistic taste upon the community any more than we can afford to let them give expression to their debased moral sense."<sup>8</sup> Preoccupied with collectivism as he was, Bourne nevertheless was aware of how deadening to the soul conformity and regimentation may be. He noted, for example, that the workers suffered severely from the stultifying effects of routine.<sup>9</sup>

Bourne found his family's traditional Calvinistic religion stultifying, too, and after a brief flirtation with Unitarianism—rejected by him because he found it too bland and uncertain—he turned away from organized religion ever after. Socialism is Christianity applied, he believed.<sup>10</sup> ". . . Your spiritual man," Bourne wrote to a friend, in a quasi-mystical style of his own,

7. Max Lerner, "Randolph Bourne and Two Generations," *Twice a Year*, Double Number 6-7 (Fall-Winter 1940, Spring-Summer 1941), 60; Dorothy Teal, "Bourne Into Myth," *The Bookman*, 75 (October 1932), 590-99.

8. "An Experiment in Cooperative Living," *Atlantic Monthly*, 113 (June 1914), 826.

9. "In the Mind of the Worker," *Atlantic Monthly*, 113 (March 1914), 377.

10. Letter RSB to Prudence Winterrowd, January 16, 1913. All let-

is my social man, vibrating in camaraderie with the beloved society, given new powers, lifted out of himself, transformed through the enriching stimulation of his fellows, — the communion of saints,—into a new being, spiritual because no longer individual.<sup>11</sup>

Most churches, he said, represent about the same "quality of religion that a picture-postal does of art."<sup>12</sup> Truth was not to be found in a church. Rather, he saw it as "thoroughly comprehended *experience*; it is created as we go along, it is what proves its verity by being verified."<sup>13</sup> "We thus speak," he commented,

*of more truth or less truth, not of Truth and Error. Relativity is thoroughly scientific; it is the absolutistic way of thinking that is theological, and my quarrel with the rationalist is that, in spite of his lip service to science, he is so fundamentally unscientific.*<sup>14</sup>

Bourne did not, however, fall into the trap often frequented by the physical and social scientist who would dismiss philosophy. Philosophy, he observed, is concerned with moral truth, or the "inner nature of things." Truth for truth's sake is an admirable motto for the philosopher. But scientific truth is for use's sake. The scientist, Bourne wrote, occupies himself with the physical universe, but the philosopher and the mystic, the artist and the poet seek the purpose and meaning of that physical universe.<sup>15</sup>

The nineteenth century as Bourne understood it was "long travail, a groping toward self-consciousness."<sup>16</sup> His socialism was a straining up to a greater consciousness. "We are demanding a definite faith, and our spiritual centre is rapidly shifting from the personal to the social in religion" he wrote.<sup>17</sup> Progress was Bourne's philosophy; realism his gospel. Pragmatism was his vehicle for achieving the first and of thrusting home to the second.

The jumble of desire and optimism which emerged from Columbia Graduate School in 1913 had learned from Dewey that the mind is

---

ters quoted are from "Some Pre-War Letters (1912-1914)," *Twice a Year*, (Spring-Summer 1939), 79ff., or "Letters (1913-1914)," *ibid.*, Fall-Winter 1940, Spring-Summer 1941, 79ff.

11. RSB to Mary Messer, December 7, 1914.

12. RSB to Alyse Gregory, September 8, 1913.

13. RSB to Prudence Winterrowd, February 5, 1913.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Youth*, 197.

16. "Continental Cultures," *New Republic*, 1 (January 16, 1915), 16. Hereafter cited as "Continental."

17. *Youth*, 48.

a tool or instrument of one's specific environment. Reason has no divine origin and no key to eternal truth, but is rather a practical instrument by which one solves problems. Words are not invariable symbols for invariable things, but clues to meanings.<sup>18</sup>

Bourne had lived deeply, and now he was ready to pass on what he had learned from life. He had been through the neglect and struggles of a handicapped and ill-favored man, and had come to understand the feelings of "all the horde of the unrepresentable and the unemployable, the incompetent and the ugly, the queer and crotchety people who make up so large a proportion of human folk."<sup>19</sup> If life is a great demoralizer, Bourne also had come to believe that it was the great moralizer. It whips us into shape, he said, and saddles us with responsibilities and the means of meeting them, with obligations and the will to meet them, with burdens and a strength to bear them. "Life," Bourne wrote, "will have little meaning for me except as I am able to contribute toward some such ideal of social betterment, if not in deed, then in word."<sup>20</sup>

Really to believe in human nature while striving to know the thousand forces that warp it from its ideal development,—to call for and expect much from men and women, and not to be disappointed and embittered if they fall short,—to try to do good with people rather than to them,—this is my religion on its human side. And if God exists, I think that He must be in the warm sun, in the kindly actions of people we know and read of, in the beautiful things of art and nature, and in the closeness of friendships. He may also be in heaven, in life, in suffering, but it is only in these simple moments of happiness that I feel Him and know that He is there.<sup>21</sup>

This, then, is the goal of my religion,—the bringing of fuller richer life to more people on this earth.<sup>22</sup>

It would be an error, however, to presume that this kind man went about his business in the style of St. Francis. He neither asked nor gave quarter. Indeed, he delighted in conflict. Earlier he had written that "At 25 I find myself full of the wildest radicalism, and look with dismay at my childhood friends who are already settled down, have achieved babies and responsibilities, and have somehow gotten

---

18. Charles Madison "The Man in the Black Cape," *American Scholar*, 15 (Summer 1946), 339-40.

19. *Youth*, 350.

20. *Ibid.*, 352.

21. *Ibid.*, 355.

22. *Ibid.*, 356.

10 years beyond me in a day." <sup>23</sup> And later from Columbia he wrote to a friend that he wished to be a prophet.

. . . I can see now that my path in life will be on the outside of things, poking holes in the holy, criticizing the established, satirizing the self-respecting and contented. Never being competent to direct and manage any of the affairs of the world myself, I will be forced to sit off by myself in the wilderness, howling like a coyote that everything is being run wrong. I think I have a genius for making trouble, for getting under people's skin. . . .<sup>24</sup>

The people who interested Bourne most were those who composed the phalanx, youth. For Bourne believed that a league of youth would remake the social system. Somebody had to, for it had stagnated, he believed, and the promise of American life had become a sham notion. Although he never abandoned this confidence in youth, his most elaborate and sophisticated expression of these notions are found in early pieces written 1911-13 and published under the title *Youth and Life*. It is difficult to envision how provocative Bourne was. Ideas today of a reforming force of youth usually evoke scoffing. But *Youth and Life* sold well, and was read by the intellectuals, particularly progressives, one of whom Bourne in his peculiar fashion had become. In a way, the recurrent theme of *Youth and Life* was as much the breakdown and failures of the older generation as it was the promise of the younger one. For as Carl Van Doren has reminded us, Bourne felt a man gets most of his ideas in youth, but it is generally only later that he holds authority. Youth, then, must become the advance guard for social progress and cultural enrichment.

What had made Bourne acceptable to his *Atlantic Monthly* audience was that his radicalism seemed an abstract rebellion which, while stimulating reading, appeared to have been "safe" at the same time. Many progressives, however, saw more deeply into Bourne, and they admired his subtle laying bare of both the energies and inhibitions of the young, the conflict between youth's class origins and his social conscience, the desire for revolt and the experimental life confronting the desire for comfort.<sup>25</sup>

Bourne presumed a great social movement had hit the younger generation hard, partly because there was widespread contempt for

23. *Ibid.*, 5.

24. RSB to Prudence Winterrowd, February 5, 1913.

25. Lerner, "Randolph Bourne," 58; Filler, *Randolph Bourne*, 41.



those who defended the outmoded in society. Religion, business, and education are selfish, self-directed; in a conspiracy to keep things the way they are. The duty of youth is to give back to society as much or more than he receives.<sup>26</sup> But he must avoid conventionality. The conventional person is the most unnatural of types. He has been rubbed smooth like a rock until he fits noiselessly into his place in society. The family is inert, crying "Anathema!" at the queer, the new, or the different. So, youth is willful, selfish, heartless in its rebellion. The criterion for success in business is dispiriting. The entire force of the organization in general is exerted to force the dissenter back into the required grooves.<sup>27</sup>

Educated men still defend the hoariest abuses, still stand sponsor for utterly antiquated laws and ideals. That is why the youth of this generation has to be so suspicious of those who seem to speak authoritatively. He knows not whom he can trust, for few there are who speak from their own inner conviction. Most of our leaders and moulders of public opinion speak simply as puppets pulled by the strings of the conservative bigotry of their class or group. It is well that the youth of to-day should know this, for the knowledge will go far towards steeling him against that most insidious form of pressure that comes from the intellectual and spiritual prestige of successful and honored men.<sup>28</sup>

Society, Bourne said, so habitually thinks on a plane lower than is reasonable that it moves one to think on a higher plane than seems to be reasonable. This is the philosophy of radicalism.<sup>29</sup> Youth sees not only this, but, moreover, it sees the unjust aspect of so much of life—the accidents to the innocent. Youth has found its way to a knowledge of things as they are, and now must fight beyond this knowledge. That first fight, Bourne said, "was our first sense of the adventure of life. Our purpose early became to track the world relentlessly down to its lair. . . . We realize the full weight of the sodden social misery around us. . . . But we need plainly feel no responsibility for what happened previously to our generation. Our responsibility now is a collective, social responsibility."<sup>30</sup> What Bourne wanted in youth was a "divine madness" reminiscent of the devout peasants who hauled the carts laden with stone for Chartres.

26. *Youth*, 291-302.

27. *Ibid.*, 249-76.

28. *Ibid.*, 278.

29. *Ibid.*, 211.

30. *Ibid.*, 156-63.

Bourne's argument might seem wild and wide-eyed today if it were not that his preaching lacked both cant and the saccharine flavor of intellectual pride. With a canny coolness, Bourne remarked that youth's problem was not how evil got into the world, but how to get it out. Sentimentality he rejected. Rather: "Who would be free himself must strike the blow!" This is the social responsibility of youth. Hero worship, yes. But the hero now is the unselfish person, and the worship is for the inner life. The hero now is to be loved because he loved first. The award for insincerity: annihilation the deadliest way: letting insincerity speak for itself. The enthusiast will be mocked, of course, but his passion for social justice will fortify him. He must not withdraw, for democracy is at stake. Democracy means a belief that people are worthy; it means trust in the good faith of the average man.<sup>31</sup>

The older generation, however, had not trusted the average man, Bourne asserted. Moreover, youth was becoming increasingly doubtful whether the older generation even believed in itself as much as it said it did. Its words were brave, but its tone was hollow. "Your mistrust of us, and your reluctance to convey over to us any of your authority in the world, looks a little too much like the fear and dislike that doubt always feels in the presence of conviction,"<sup>32</sup> Bourne observed. The older generation lacks conviction because conflict is absent from its experience. The paradox—for Bourne luxuriated in irony and paradox—which the older generation does not see is that struggle brings youth rather than old age. It is the sleek and easy who are prematurely and permanently old. Prudence and its offspring, inertia, are hateful things, particularly because they so often are manifest in the ideas of adults which are wrong and grow progressively more wrong as their proprietors age. The tragedy of life is that this sterility rules the world, and therefore ideas are always a generation behind social conditions. Youth, however, constructs ideas for the future. Youth is the incarnation of reason pitted against the rigidity of tradition. Ignore the quibblings of elders. Dare! Use science, for science means nothing shall be wasted.<sup>33</sup>

It was scientific efficiency which Bourne hoped to see imbedded in American education. From Dewey he had imbibed the theory that the school was not preparation for life but was itself part of life and must be integrated with it. He was convinced that one learned by doing. Bourne, however, was by no means alone in support of Dewey's in-

31. *Ibid.*, 55-110.

32. *Ibid.*, 49-50.

33. *Ibid.*, 1-22.

strumentalism—the theory that the function of thought should be instrumental in controlling environment, and that ideas are valuable according to their function in human experience and progress. Dewey already had a wide following. But Bourne was one of Dewey's most articulate advocates. *Youth and Life* was permeated with pragmatic instrumentalism, and subsequent articles on education expressed the same view. In 1916 Bourne published his widely acclaimed *The Gary Schools*, a 200-page study of the school system in that Indiana town. One of Dewey's disciples, William Wirt, had been appointed superintendent there. Wirt took a decrepit, pitiful, bankrupt school system and made it a laboratory nationally known and studied. A key to his success had been tight scheduling. Wirt's careful manipulation of class periods showed educators that more could be done with less space than theretofore believed possible. Furthermore, students were permitted freedom as to which classes they went, and freedom in moving about the buildings and grounds. If a student looked in on an art class which interested him, he could join the class.<sup>34</sup> While Bourne broadcast these innovations in *The Gary Schools*, the innovations and Bourne's instrumentalist thinking on education already had been known and aired in numerous articles for two years.

In Bourne's hometown, Bloomfield, N.J., the massive public high school dwarfed the handsome brownstone Presbyterian church which had been built in 1796 on the other side of the street. The physical relationship symbolized what Bourne believed to be the nation-wide eclipse of the church in the community as the source of authority and enlightenment. Such authority had to be concentrated somewhere. Business was intellectually sterile, however, and government he feared for its coercive potential. But the schools could be the liberating element in American life. The school, Bourne wrote, could revivify American democracy. There was a serious flaw, however. "We have," he commented,

achieved a democratic education in the sense that common schooling is practically within the reach of everyone. But a democratic education in the sense of giving equal opportunities to each child of finding in the school that life and training which he peculiarly needs, has still to be generally worked for. The problem of American education is how to transform an institution into a life.<sup>35</sup>

34. After success in Gary, the New York City school board hired Wirt to revamp the school system. Politics in New York City sabotaged his efforts, however. *Education and Living* (New York, 1917) was also a successful Bourne book.

35. "Education as Living," *New Republic* 8 (August 5, 1916), 10.

In this respect Bourne contended that a stimulating and rich education must provide not only academics, but play, constructive work, socialization and other non-intellectual activities. He urged the use of newspapers daily in class, a greater emphasis on the democratic way of life, the application of psychological testing and other education measurements which had been developed.

Bourne feared stagnation in education as much as in any other aspect of life. Stagnation results partly from incompetent teachers and largely from a misconception of the child, he said. "The pseudo-science of religion" presumed children were empty vessels to be filled with knowledge, Bourne protested, but children are no more than they are automatons which can be wound up and set running by the teacher. They are "pushing wills and desires and curiosities," and as living things they need nothing so much as living room. They live as wholes far more than older persons do, and they cannot be made to become minds, and minds alone, for four or five hours daily without stultification.<sup>36</sup>

What concerned Bourne was that American education had grown up institutionally compartmentalized, jealously apart from the rest of the community. It had developed its own technique and its own professional spirit. It was cold and logical, indeed, by far the best ordered of American institutions, and its morale was the nearest thing to compulsory military service. But even the best schools have an antiseptic atmosphere, Bourne complained. Contrasting strangely with the color and confusion of American life, the school's bare classrooms, its stiff seats, and its austere absence of beauty suggested a hospital where painful if necessary intellectual operations are performed.<sup>37</sup>

Bourne called for and detected what he termed a turning away from the unconscious school to the self-conscious school. In the latter, the notion that the world is divided into two radically different classes, adults and school children, was junked. In place of discipline—defined as the ability to do painful things—children would do joyfully and well what interests them. The older generation mistrusts this, but

the transformation from the unconscious school to the self-conscious school is the very kernel of the present educational excitement. . . . That old perverted honor of the teacher never to admit that she is wrong lest the child's confidence be disturbed,

---

36. *Ibid.*, 11.

37. *Ibid.*

and become conscious and critical of the methods and materials of his education, is breaking down.<sup>38</sup>

What Bourne hoped to see replace inflexible concepts of education was a concept of the school as the embryonic community life in which the child gradually would become familiar with the knowledge he will need for adult life. It is idle, Bourne insisted, in an article on Gary, Indiana, schools,

to learn things that are not used, and. . .therefore whatever is learned in school must be used in school. School must be real work, productive in some form that the child can appreciate and not mere storing up of the information and skill against some possible future time. . . .The idea is to make the school as inevitable and natural to the child as is his home.<sup>39</sup>

Crucial to understanding Bourne's preoccupation with American education is that at heart he was not deeply concerned with methodological reform *per se*, although he did not ignore that question. What he wanted was a rich environment for culture. His rebellion was more against taste or content, than against structure. As a modernist, Bourne believed a crucial task was to make teachers see that the constant challenge to taste is of the most important functions of the school. He praised the Montessori experiment because it trained senses and quickened responses to sound, colors and forms.<sup>40</sup>

Bourne theorized that if the child were urged to choose and express his likes and dislikes during his school life, and if he were made to clarify what appealed to him and what repelled him, he would develop his own cultural tastes. Emphasis must be placed on what the student likes instead of what he ought to like. The modern school, Bourne decided, was where this critical discriminating attitude has a chance of being cultivated. But art education, for example, suffered from teachers who had only the mechanics of appreciation without any "inner glow" as to what art is about.<sup>41</sup>

[The teacher] need provide only the paraphernalia of art, the materials and processes, for the student to do his own work.

38. "The Self-Conscious School," *New Republic*, 6 (April 8, 1916), 260.

39. "The Gary Public Schools," *Scribner's Magazine*, 60 (September 1916), 373-74.

40. "Education in Taste," *New Republic*, 6 (March 4, 1916), 122. The Montessori method for training and instructing young children aimed at self-education by the child himself, accompanied by special emphasis on the training of the senses. Maria Montessori (1870-1952) was an Italian educator.

41. *Ibid.*, 123.

If the teacher is of sound original taste, he can give the student criticism and aid him in his analysis and comparison. If he is not, he is at least prevented from hypocritising the student's taste.

If this attitude became general in our aesthetic education, it would not be long before the results became noticeable. We should get a variety of tastes—some of them traditional, some of them strange and new, but most of them at least spontaneous.<sup>42</sup>

Bourne's impatience with taste as it would be ordained by a supposed cultural elite was intimately related to the vision of American culture which he tried to get across to readers of the *Dial*, the *New Republic*, and the *Seven Arts* in the second decade of the twentieth century. It was a brash, impudent, irreverent rejection of the Arnold school of culture. Matthew Arnold had argued that to know the best that had been thought and said, to appreciate the master works which previous civilizations had produced, and to put the mind and appreciation in contact with all ages, was to experience culture. The best of culture was what an intellectual and artistic elite in their greater perception and finer taste decreed to be fine. If they said Browning was grand and Vachel Lindsay mediocre, it was so!

While Bourne often wrote of American culture, much of the core of his thinking along these lines was expressed in an article inspired by a request of the American Federation of the Arts that the Carnegie Foundation investigate the teaching of art in the United States. Bourne, of course, agreed that the idea of what a good art education is should be clarified, for he believed art education had been almost entirely a learning about what is "good." "'Culture,'" he remarked, "has come to mean the jacking-up of one's appreciations a notch at a time until they have reached a certain standard level. To be cultured has meant to like the masterpieces."<sup>43</sup> This is false, however, because it breeds a paralyzing reverence for the classics.

To Bourne such a concept of culture was "unpleasantly undemocratic." He did not deny the superlative beauty of what had come to be officially labeled the best that had been thought and done in the world. He objected, however, to this being made the universal norm, for if people are educated this way, only those are educated whose tastes run to the classics. Meantime, the rest flounder around trying to "squeeze the appreciations through the needle's eye." The result is either hypocrites or lowbrows, and culture is reserved for only a

<sup>42</sup>. *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup>. "Cult of the Best," *New Republic*, 5 (January 15, 1916), 275.

few. "The rest of us," he said, "are left without guides, without encouragement, and tainted with original sin."<sup>44</sup>

Cultural preoccupations—as would those in education—will be valueless, Bourne contended, if they are not devoted to clarifying and integrating natural taste. Emphasis always must be on what one likes, not on what one ought to like. As long as you humbly follow the best, you have no eyes for the vital. If training has been to learn and appreciate the best that has been thought and done, it has, therefore, not been to discriminate between the significant and the irrelevant which everyday experience flings in your face. Civilized life is really one aesthetic challenge after another, and no training in art appreciation is worth anything unless one has learned to react to forms and settings. The callousness with which Americans confront their "ragbag" city streets is evidence enough, Bourne said, of the futility of the Arnold ideal. To have learned to appreciate a Mantegna and a Japanese print, and Dante and Debussy, and not to have learned nausea at Main Street, means an education which is not merely worthless, but destructive. Widespread artistic taste never developed in the United States, Bourne asserted, because of the movement to like what one ought. The movement caught those whose taste coincided with the canons. But it perverted a larger host who tried to pretend their tastes coincided. It has left untouched the joyless masses who might easily have evolved a folk culture if they had not been outlawed by the ideal. We are fashion-ridden in culture and art because our education has made acquisition and not discrimination the motive.<sup>45</sup>

Inevitably, Bourne's view took its "societistic" turn. "Art to most of us," he observed,

has come to mean painting instead of the decoration and design and social setting that would make significant our objective life. Our moral sense has made us mad for artistic "rightness." What we have got out of it is something much worse than imitation. It is worship.<sup>46</sup>

Bourne was deeply disturbed by what he termed a fetish with things European. "To a genuinely patriotic American this cultural humility of ours is humiliating," he wrote in an *Atlantic Monthly* article entitled "Our Cultural Humility."<sup>47</sup> This humility was the chief obsta-

---

44. *Ibid.*

45. *Ibid.*, 276-77.

46. *Ibid.*, 276.

47. *Atlantic Monthly*, 114 (October 1914), 505.

de preventing Americans from producing any true indigenous culture of their own. It was the victim of the tyranny of the best. Where Arnold had presumed that appreciation of the best allowed a discriminating trailing off into the less, Bourne contended Arnold's notion was the exact opposite of the psychological process. A true appreciation of the "remote and magnificent," as Bourne put it, is acquired only after judgment has learned to discriminate accurately and with taste between the good and bad, the sincere and the false, of the familiar and everyday art and writing. In any other country, Whitman, William James, Emerson, Thoreau, MacDowell and Saint-Gaudens would be lionized, he asserted. To set up an alien standard of the classics is merely to give our lazy taste a resting place. Bourne wanted in the United States what he termed the most harmless of patriotisms, cultural chauvinism. Without it, there can be no unique American civilization, he argued.<sup>48</sup>

To come to an intense self-consciousness of these qualities, to feel them in the work of the masters, and to search for them everywhere among the lesser artists and thinkers who are trying to express the soul of this hot chaos of America,—this will be the attainment of culture for us.

Not to look on ravished while our marvelous millionaires fill our museums with "old masters," armor, and porcelains, but to turn our eyes upon our own art for a time, shut ourselves in with our own genius, and cultivate with an intense and partial pride what we have already achieved against the obstacles of our cultural humility.

Only thus shall we conserve the American spirit and saturate the next generation with those qualities which are our own strength.

Only thus can we take our rightful place among the cultures of the world, to which we are entitled if we would but recognize it. We shall never be able to perpetuate our ideals except in the form of art and literature; the world will never understand our spirit except in terms of art.

When shall we learn that "culture," like the kingdom of heaven, lies within us, in the heart of our national soul, and not in the foreign galleries and books? When shall we learn to be proud? For only pride is creative.<sup>49</sup>

Bourne's vision, then, was of an organic national culture—molded

48. *Ibid.*, 506.

49. *Ibid.*, 507.



from the nation's ethnic groups and by no means necessarily dominated by Anglo-Saxonism—which would find its leadership in the youthful violence of a few. His hope was his own 20th century rendering of Whitman's "Democratic Vistas."

Bourne's thought along these lines did not slacken toward the end of his career, but World War I crashed in upon him with a force which he could not and would not ignore. At first Bourne's observations were detached, but nonetheless sensitive and perceptive. With United States participation, however, a fury possessed him. To Bourne American participation meant an end to the hope of liberal, progressive reform.

Before the United States entered the war, Bourne had acknowledged that Britain had achieved wide influence in America because she claimed moral justification in her war role. Bourne did not, however, interpret the war in terms of which side was right. He saw it instead as the clash of national cultures. He asserted that if the apologetic of other Continental nations could be probed it would show they all tended to interpret themselves in the terms Germany used, that is, in terms of national culture instead of morality. In not seeing this, American opinion was bartering away its opportunity to judge the directing animus of the war. America was accepting an easy, superficial explanation in terms of personal wickedness, and thereby had succumbed to the temptation of feeling holy.<sup>50</sup>

Bourne believed it was an intense self-consciousness of a common culture, language, attitudes and appreciations which bound a Continental people together. His was the value they wished to assert. While the objective, mechanical, impersonal side of civilization had been tending to uniformity, the subjective, spiritual, stylistic, "valuational" side of European peoples had remained intensely diverse. This was good because it made for a vastly richer and more vivid world. These tendencies promised an even more superb Europe than had gone before. The war from this point of view, Bourne suggested, may be a vast liberating movement, clearing the way for a more conscious, more intense world. The war had thrown into the furnace all the cultures which had been stumbling through the 19th century. The reconstruction of Europe should be made to coincide with cultural unity, although this is a remote ideal rather than an immediately realizable solution.<sup>51</sup>

Shortly after Bourne had returned from Europe in 1914, he had written that

50. "Continental," pp. 14-15.

51. *Ibid.*, 15-16.

No one can predict how truly that year [1914] will mark the "end of an era." It seems true, however, that most of the tendencies of democracy, social reform, and international understanding, . . . have been snapped off like threads, perhaps never to be pieced together again.<sup>52</sup>

Until early in 1917 Bourne, like others, believed the United States would not become militarily involved. But by July 1917 his hopes for America had begun to crumble. "If the enterprize goes on endlessly," he wrote, "the work so blithely undertaken for the defense of democracy, will have crushed out the only genuinely precious thing in a nation, the hope and ardent idealism of youth."<sup>53</sup>

In the next eighteen months, Bourne broke with Dewey over Dewey's support of the war; he excoriated the idealists of the *New Republic* for what he believed to be their folly in thinking the United States could will the course of the war; he castigated American intellectuals, denouncing them for taking the nation into war when they could have been clarifying the problem; and he developed an embryo theory of the State which he had come to see as the oppressor of individualism and the coercer of dissent.

Bourne was careful to distinguish himself and his sympathizers from conscientious objectors. Bourne said he belonged to an anti-war element which had tried to be realistic in its sentiment. Although thought had been manipulated against this group, it did not welcome martyrdom, he stated. He had come to the point of rejecting the instrumental use of intelligence for conscious social purposes. Those who argued with Dewey imply, Bourne said, that the conscience is balked by an unpleasant situation and is futile unless it attaches itself to forces moving in another and more desirable direction. Dissatisfied with the given means or end, one chooses another alternative, either a new end to which the means may be shaped, or a new means to effect the desired end. But in applying this theory to the war situation, the instrumentalists ignored the fact that alternatives are rigorously limited, Bourne said. Instrumentalism is invalid here, for "Is not war perhaps the one social absolute, the one situation where the choice of ends ceases to function?"<sup>54</sup>

Peace without victory, Bourne argued, is a logical contradiction. War is its own end. The objector has no alternatives. Because war blots out choice of ends, it should be rejected by the philosopher. The

52. *Literary Radical*, 75.

53. *Untimely Papers* (New York, 1919), 52.

54. "Conscience and Intelligence in War," *Dial*, 63 (September 13, 1917), 193.

"realist pacifist" sees that once he accepts war, he is pushed along a line of inevitables. Bourne insisted that contrary to general belief the pacifists had constructive suggestions, but lacked a medium, and so were made to look stupid.<sup>55</sup> The intellectuals could have spent the last two years, Bourne wrote in June 1917, clearing the air, but now they were identified with the least democratic forces in American life. Indeed, the war sentiment had been strongest among the least liberal and least democratic elements of society. The whole era now seemed spiritually wasted. War had taught the intellectuals nothing. Now they were willing to use force to continue the war to absolute exhaustion, but they could not explain why they were unwilling to use force before to coerce the world to a speedy peace. Intellectuals could have used their energy to ensure that United States participation in the war meant the intellectual order they wished. Instead it was used to lead an apathetic nation into an irresponsible war, without guarantees from those belligerents whose cause the United States was saving. Bourne knew how unpopular his ideas were, but he would not be shut up. "There is work to be done," he said, "to prevent this war of ours from passing into popular mythology as a holy crusade."<sup>56</sup>

Bourne continued to argue that the United States was the tool of the allies, and that the United States had surrendered its initiative to influence the peace as liberals would like to see it made. He tried to convince his readers that patriotism was unimportant in the final analysis, just acquiescence. The penalty the realist pays in accepting war is to see disappear one by one the justification for accepting war. For willing war means willing all the evils that are originally bound up with it. The task at hand for his generation of malcontents and aloof men and women, Bourne said, was the conservation of American promise. If America had lost political isolation, he noted, it was all the more obliged to retain its spiritual integrity.

The war—or American promise; one must choose. One cannot be interested in both. For the effect of the war will be to impoverish American promise. It cannot advance it, however liberals may choose to identify American promise with a league of nations to enforce peace. Americans who desire to cultivate the promise of American life need not lift a finger to obstruct the war, but they cannot conscientiously accept it.<sup>57</sup>

---

55. *Ibid.*, 195.

56. *Literary Radical*, 221.

57. *Untimely*, 111.

Bourne had not become a pessimist, however. He felt his skepticism could be made a shelter behind which is built a wider consciousness of the personal and social and artistic ideals which American civilization needed for the good life. "We can be skeptical constructively, if, thrown back on our inner resources from the world of war which is taken as the overmastering reality, we search much more actively to clarify our attitude and express a richer significance in the American sense. . . . For many of us, resentment against the war has meant a vividder consciousness of what we are seeking in American life."<sup>58</sup>

If Bourne had not become a pessimist, he had, however, become a cynic where the state was concerned, principally because of what he felt the society which was produced by the state did to the individual. The individual scarcely exists, he said, in the normal relationship between society and the individual. Those who refuse to act as symbols of society's folkways and to do society's ordaining, are outlawed; there is an elaborate machinery for dealing with such sports.

Bourne began to get his notions of the State on paper in 1918, but he left only a fragment. His chief assertion was that the State perpetuated war, for, as he repeatedly said in the fragment, "War is the health of the State." The State is not equivalent to the nation or the country. The nation is synonymous with the people and serves their welfare. Nations do not war because their interests do not conflict. But States exist for the purpose of waging war and strengthening themselves at the expense of the conquered. Governments are their agents and serve them by declaring war without consulting the people—that is, the nation—who do the fighting and dying. The State was no more ordained by God than any other social institution. The State was exalted by the class which used it to gain power at the expense of the nation. The sanctity of the State becomes identified with the sanctity of the ruling class. They stay in power under the impression that in obeying and serving them, one obeys and serves society. The Founding Fathers successfully questioned this sanctity, and in the Declaration of Independence they posited doctrines incompatible with the divine right of kings and states. But these doctrines were given no concrete form; men did not know how to exploit their new liberty. War weariness, exaggerated fear of other states, and economic distress caused many of them to sigh for their former political mode, thereby reconstituting the State.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>58.</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>59.</sup> "Unfinished Fragment of the States," in *Untimely, passim*; "Black Cape," 345-46.

As Bourne loved paradox, so his career ended in unhappy paradox. He was pushed to the point of too consistent fault-finding with the institutions of his day. In the end he seemed alienated from the people. Paradoxically his career momentarily had snagged on a scorn for institutions which he had tried to reform. And unhappily, as Max Lerner has written, by believing at first that the nation never could be so caught up in war fever as it did become, he sorely misjudged the culture in which he lived. He was on debatable ground when he asserted the liberals had accepted what the bigoted, "unsocialized" patriot had demanded of the United States; when he contended the war had "run into the sand" the movement for progressive democracy; when he stated the liberals had become an apathetic herd-like unanimity; when he argued the work did not have a concern and stake in the outcome of the war. And while his work is rich in criticism, it is marked by a slimmness of alternatives.

Bourne was a seminal influence and leading spokesman of the anti-war radicals despite his shortcomings. There was ground for his assertions, and he argued them with strict intellectual honesty, only to become himself a casualty of the war. He was a minor prophet, and if his reaction to and judgment of contemporary affairs can be punctured, the stimulation and vision of America he exuded are unassailable. He was ahead of his generation in love for Americana. He was deeply concerned with injustice. It was his frenetic concern with the promise of America which led him to oppose the war so desperately. He was fearless, for his position resulted in loss of income, reputation and "friends." Love of country and noble vision put him among the most unpopular dissenters in American history.

Bourne occasionally will be written about in the future, but he died without leaving a giant written legacy. In 1913 he had written, ". . . I feel like a soul doomed always to struggle towards a salvation which is impossible to be realized. . . ." <sup>60</sup> On another occasion he had written:

Nothing is so pathetic as the young man who spends his spiritual force too early, so that when the world of ideals is presented to him, his force being spent, he can only grasp at second-hand ideals and mouldy formulas. <sup>61</sup>

There is no evidence that this had happened to Bourne. His greatest production lay ahead. He already had made his mark as a literary critic, and he had completed the opening chapter of a novel. If the

---

<sup>60</sup>. RSB to Mary Messer, February 7, 1914.

<sup>61</sup>. *Youth*, 5.

grace and sensitivity of the rest of the novel had equaled that of his lone chapter, the book probably would have succeeded. Ironically, the *Dial* had come under new management and Bourne soon was to become its political editor. Never would he have lacked for material, for he had written, ". . . People. I am interested in nothing else, and all my studies are valueless except as they throw light on people's souls and personalities."<sup>62</sup>

This unhappy, celibate, repulsive, and blessed man is so forgotten today that it is hard to imagine the bereavement his passing caused in certain circles. Comment was widespread then. The distinguished critic Floyd Dell spoke for many when he said:

Those who are not in some sense of the younger generation will hardly realize what poignancy there is for us in the news of the death of [Bourne]. . . . [He] belonged to us, and stood for us, in a way which he perhaps did not fully know, but which we now very keenly feel. . . . In literature, in art, in politics, in all departments of life, there has been an alienation of the younger generation from traditional activities and the new untraditional activities have seemed unformed, fantastic or half-hearted—even insincere. Randolph Bourne was part of this revolt, its blood pulsed in him, he breathed its air. . . . So it was that his achievement seemed to us not only significant of his powers, but of our own, he was the promise of our specific contribution to American life. He was by virtue not only of his clear thinking, and his quiet courage, but no less of his sweetness and humor and debonair charm, one of the strong and triumphant personalities of our generation.<sup>63</sup>

What Dell meant was that Randolph Bourne and Hope were one.

62. RSB to Alyse Gregory, January 16, 1913.

63. "Randolph Bourne," *New Republic*, 27 (January 4, 1919), 276.