Vox Populi
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Vox Populi: Essays in the History of an Idea.

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The problem which the essays in this book try to illuminate is the history of a famous proverb, *Vox populi vox Dei*. Upon examination, the first two words of this sentence turn out to have been highly ambiguous. And though their meaning shifted as the centuries rolled along, the words themselves remained as they were. This is what has happened to famous works of art as well, both literary and pictorial. They remain great masterpieces, but the reason why they are praised varies from age to age. One need only think of the fortunes of the *Aeneid*, *Hamlet*, *Don Quixote* in the history of literature, and of the *Mona Lisa*, Bruegel's *Fall of Icarus*, Piero della Francesca's *Resurrection* in the history of painting.

Not only has the denotation of the *vox populi* changed, but its connotation has changed also. Whereas the *populus* in literature was for many centuries the butt of jokes, to be used for comic relief in serious drama, it became an object of pity and later of aesthetic charm. Popular opinion was in Roman times to be despised, if considered at all; it began to be sought only after the French Revolution. As all that was left of primitive man, the peasant became the prototype of "natural" man and hence his standards of right and wrong and even of beauty and ugliness were to be accepted by everyone. But the People as a collective body of individuals included more than the peasantry; it also came to number among its members small artisans, the poor, the exploited, those who are called today "the underprivileged." The peasant in Bruegel, the urban lowlife in Caravaggio, turned into saints and martyrs. And when one came to the nineteenth century, Courbet and Millet painted both types, not in an idyllic fashion but with plain realism. There is even reason to believe that the ballet dancers of Degas were not intended to be fairylike creatures of the opera but hard-working girls, angular rather than graceful, and no
more ethereal than his laundresses and absinthe drinkers. Thus where the Voice of the People in ancient times meant the voice of the Elders or the Prince Electors or sometimes the Barons, it came to mean the voice of the laboring man, whether rural or urban. The “Folk” became a solid body of human beings in which was vested the right to speak for all, whether in matters of value or of fact.

To do complete justice to this story would require such broad knowledge of religious, political, economic, and aesthetic history that probably no one man could succeed in covering the entire ground. Whether such a polymath exists or not, I am not the man. Consequently, I have attempted merely to write a group of historical sketches, indicating the high points in the narrative and leaving the rest to someone of greater erudition. I shall be amply satisfied if I have outlined a story of interest to some future historian. Not only have I not written a full history of a cluster of ideas, I have not even proposed much in the way of explanation. In fact, I doubt that causal explanations of a scientific type—and what others are there?—are possible when one is dealing with individual occurrences and not with classes of events.

There will also be found in these essays too much documentation for some readers and too little for others. I apologize to the former by pointing out that it is wiser to cite the very words of a man than to paraphrase them. Whether one is a professional scholar or not, one is better off knowing precisely what ideas are attributed to a person quoted. To the latter I can simply say that with Montesquieu I believe that to write well is to skip the intermediate ideas. Ignoramuses are not likely to waste their time on a book like this, and nothing is gained by overloading the pages of a book with footnotes. My quotations form, as it were, a little anthology of opinions. I have simply used my own judgment in determining what to leave out. In dealing, for instance, with the fabliaux I have seen no reason to quote several where one will do. Similarly, I have thought that Shakespeare was a better representative of the
Elizabethan Age than Shakespeare plus a dozen other contemporary dramatists. This may seem to be a lack of thoroughness. But, like the first recorded Boaz, I have left something for the gleaners.

The bibliography lists only those books and articles which I have either quoted or referred to. Other works which I have read but not quoted are not listed. The purpose of the list is to show what editions I have used, for in some cases texts vary from edition to edition. I may add that those cited are usually those which I happen to own, not those which would be the most fashionable or the most current.

I cannot close without a word of thanks to my many friends who have patiently helped me when I asked for help: to Professor Grace Frank, Mrs. Bryson Burroughs, Drs. John Baldwin, Harold Cherniss, Morris D. Forkosch, E. H. Gombrich, Henry Rowell, and Owsei Temkin. To the National Endowment for the Humanities I owe a special debt of gratitude for giving me six months of freedom in which to work without interruption. The staff of The Johns Hopkins Library has as always spared no pains to assist me in that spirit of cooperation that has always distinguished Johns Hopkins. There are of course many others who helped me without realizing what they were doing, above all the students who have followed my courses and taught me by their questions, and to them I express my thanks as well.

G.B.

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