Ideas on the March

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The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America
By Louis Menand
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001

Edmund Wilson opened his monumental work, *To the Finland Station* (1940), with a wonderful vignette of Michelet, in a hurried passion, reading Vico. Out of Michelet's confrontation with Vico, Wilson writes, "a whole new philosophical-artistic world was born" (6). The idea of a new world emerging, a world sanctioned by the romantic and scientific power of history, defines Wilson's "study in the writing and acting of history." All roads in his study lead to Lenin and the Russian Revolution. While Wilson was not a partisan of Lenin, and certainly not an apologist for the Soviet Union, he composed his work with a sense of history unfolding and breathing hard upon his neck.

Louis Menand's *The Metaphysical Club*, a history of the rise of pragmatism in the post–Civil War US, is modeled upon Wilson's classic. The connection between Menand and Wilson's work is hardly fanciful. A reissue of *To the Finland Station* in 2003 features Menand's foreword, which can be read as a commentary on his own work, published over 50 years later. Menand appreciates Wilson's historical sweep, his willingness to take ideas seriously and to contextualize and link them to historical events. Nor does Wilson shy away from the great-men-in-history approach, peppered with leisurely forays into their personal histories. The key to Wilson's success, in Menand's analysis, was his willingness to combine fact and narration in an act of the imagination, to impose an order on his materials. While Wilson captured the passion of his subjects and their ideas, he managed to maintain a healthy skepticism. In both works, ideas are on the march, trampling through the vineyards where the grapes of history are stored.

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The qualities that Menand praises in Wilson he takes as the markers for his own work. *The Metaphysical Club* reads like a dream, with snappy vignettes of major thinkers, informed yet accessible synopses of ideas, and attention to historical events. The imperative behind the work is to trace the relationship between an emerging complex of ideas, born out of the rubble of the Civil War and an emerging industrial civilization. The benchmarks of this new medley of concepts, captured under the name of *pragmatism*, as

developed by Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., Charles Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, is a sense of contingency, rejection of absolutes, and the grounding of ideas in the flux of experience. The characters in *The Metaphysical Club* share a skepticism that makes them wary of dogma, complacency, and fashion. Hence, the figures of early pragmatism are lined up in a row to serve as precursors to Wilson and to Menand. Rather than confinement to the dustbin of historical amusement or curiosity, the pragmatists have, by implication, something to offer us presently.

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Menand is a prolific cultural critic, often commenting on educational reform, literature, and the culture wars. His position is sometimes hard to pin down. As David Bromwich remarked in a cutting review of Menand's collection of essays, *American Studies* (2002), Menand is a singularly unusual critic, someone "who has made such a virtue out of not having strong reactions" (28). In response to analyses of his *The Metaphysical Club* in the *Intellectual History Newsletter*, Menand contended, "I am as postmodernist as anyone" ("Reply" 125). Surely, Menand is being a bit disingenuous here. The structure and concerns that animate every page of *The Metaphysical Club* parade themselves as a gutsy attempt to resurrect a mode of analysis largely eschewed in postmodern academe: a sweeping narrative (contra Lyotard) organized around a coterie of dead white males (contra most postmodernists), with relatively little intertextuality (contra the current state of literary studies). His style is one of indirect intervention, allowing his readers to draw conclusions about the value of pragmatism and its relation to our present conflicts. Menand never preaches in *The Metaphysical Club*; but that does not mean his text is without a message.

The story that Menand narrates is familiar, but he tells it with gusto. In essence, Menand presents a chronicle of generational conflict, with those coming of age in the Civil War era in rebellion against the sentimentality, science, and religion cherished by their fathers. This battle played itself out on both the fields of personal relations and philosophic and scientific doctrines. James and Holmes, especially, worked under the dark, bloody shadow of the Civil War and the challenge of Darwinism. Against their fathers' distanced relation to conflict, these young men forged a new perspective, a provisional approach to ideas that judged truth not as a simple matter of absolutes or correspondences but as a process. Concepts, then, must be tested within the stream of experience and always with an eye to the concrete rather than the ideal. The saving grace of these thinkers, for Menand, was their skepticism, their refusal to turn their method into a fixed ideology. Thus, for all of the possible postmodernist relativism lurking behind James's formulations of pragmatism, Menand soberly instructs readers that James

never denigrated the notion that reality exists and proclaimed that the individual who plays games with that reality is bound to falter. Yet James also knew that any attempt to rein in that reality, to presume to capture it in a name or concept, was equally doomed to failure.

Menand's subjects become philosophers of the American experience. He nicely demonstrates how all of them willingly shook hands with reality—Holmes in the Civil War, James in his scientific expeditions in the Amazon, Peirce in a court case about a contested will, and Dewey with the conflict of the Pullman strike and in his educational laboratory at the University of Chicago. These men lived in tumultuous times, when ideals of individualism reigned yet when the nature of reality, under the march of industrial capitalism, was changing the landscape. Their pragmatic ideas responded to and helped to shape these changes. Hence, the sinews of modern America, in Menand's account, were muscled in ideas as much as in mills.

It is not always clear whether Menand views pragmatism as critical or supportive of these profound changes, especially since he maintains that the doctrine founders most on the question of values, on what is, and why it is necessary. This is an old complaint, registered strongly by Bertrand Russell years ago and more recently by John Patrick Diggins. Pragmatism does run aground, for some, because it cannot rest on bedrock values or a precise way of determining their relative worth. Yet, even if the pragmatic method refuses to be tethered to a fixed set of values (a very unpragmatic possibility), it has historically functioned as an ideal that fits especially well with a democratic sensibility, predicated upon pluralism and continuous dialogue. Moreover, since it rejects absolutes and dogma, pragmatism has mostly been identified with liberalism.

Menand does not come right out and celebrate pragmatism. Is Menand not a partisan of pragmatism? He has remarked that he is "agnostic" on the doctrine ("Reply" 121). To be sure, his style of argument, as critics have pointed out, works through a certain distanced enthusiasm, a narrative flow that seeks to discuss these issues without apparent reference to contemporary events. But the clear subtext of this work is that pragmatism is a bevy of concepts that were right for America in the post–Civil War years and that remain valuable, if not necessary, for us today.

Menand is on shaky ground in his brief "Epilogue," where he attempts to account for the presumed decline of pragmatism in the Cold War era, roughly the years from the mid-1940s until 1989. Menand contends that the ideological struggle with the Soviet Union left little room for the skeptical approach of pragmatism to prosper. This premise is problematic to begin with on two counts. It suggests that a pragmatic perspective is helpless in the face of ideology. In

fact, that is when it is most compelling and necessary. Moreover, the postwar years did not see the demise of pragmatism. Sidney Hook and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., worked in a pragmatic mode; Richard Rorty's neopragmatist offensive began in the 1970s, while Cold War ideologies were still in place. Pragmatism's success, perhaps, may have actually hidden it from Menand's attention. Even within the halls of philosophy departments, in the years of the celebration of analytic philosophy, major American philosophers, ranging from C. I. Lewis to Willard Quine and Nelson Goodman, worked in a pragmatic vein.

Nonetheless, Menand's work proposes that America has entered into a new era, a nonideological one that is proper ground for a flowering of pragmatism. Of course, he wrote his book prior to the disaster of September 11 and before the upsurge of American engagement with internal security and worldwide intervention. Whether the new world will prove more amenable to pragmatist ideas, as of this writing, seems uncertain at best. Even if Menand misses the mark of the historical moment in this regard, his book is an intervention in the cultural wars. In many ways, it is a statement about how to do history and how to conceive the discipline of American studies.

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize in history and a best-seller, Menand's book has obviously captured the public's attention. His work has a Ken Burns–like quality to it: the sense of tragedy, richly drawn characters, and the conceit that this mixture brought forth a new nation. The method employed by Menand has a decidedly anti-theoretical bent. He does not trouble any of his characters or their ideas with jargon or critique. His work ignores the postmodernist strictures against the grand narrative. While Menand does address issues of race and identity, especially in a chapter on how pragmatist ideas supported pluralism, race is not central to his book. Gender and class issues, too, are almost absent. Hence, *The Metaphysical Club* is a well-crafted, traditionalist work; one that readers can enjoy on a host of levels—allowing them to brush up against philosophical notions, descriptions of battles, court cases, and stormy relationships. In the process, Menand implies that pragmatism is an American tradition that we are wise to recognize and follow in our own perilous times.

Menand's book has been well received among intellectual and cultural historians, who, while they bemoan his unwillingness to muddy the waters of his sketches, are quick to recognize *The Metaphysical Club* as a work that they wished they had composed. His work builds upon many studies of American philosophers over the last 20 years, and he does not offer any compellingly new interpretations. Rather, he brilliantly synthesizes the work of other scholars

and puts it forth in a most pleasant and accessible package. But his work is more than simply a summing up of the spadework done by scholars. In an age when so many books are confined to an academic ghetto, Menand's book stands out as a work that will remain popular outside of academe and be a continued presence in undergraduate survey courses in the history of American thought. The very nature of its success, its resolute unwillingness to bow to academic expectations and trends, consigns this book, I imagine, to purgatory in the world of academic theory. Scholars in American studies, for instance, will not build upon this work. In an age when American studies revolves around issues of race, gender, and class, when it posits the very notion of America as a problematic construction, Menand's book takes on the look of a fossil before its time.

Such a reception might well please Menand, serving to support his contention that the ideological culture wars seek to limit the canon and that scholars are most concerned with protection of their own turf. Menand challenges his enemies to come up with both a narrative structure and cast of characters that can engage the minds of the educated masses in a manner that will help them to function in the post–Cold War years. Otherwise, the practice of American studies will be hermetic, a dialogue among scholars without real presence outside the academic world. Perhaps in a time of renewed ideological vigor and absolutist modes of thinking, a pragmatic sensibility predicated upon a skeptical turn of mind, and committed to reform, is exactly what the doctor ordered.

Works Cited

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