

## Comment by the Editor

### THINKING AS A CHILD

One of the most common habits of human mentality is the transformation of the abstract into the concrete. People are eye-minded. An idea to be understood must have visual or tactile value; and so familiar objects embodying the characteristics of the idea are used as symbols. Courage is pictured as a rock, difficulties as ruts in the winding path of progress, knowledge as a torch, hospitality a latch-string. Allegorical figures are devised to represent social groups. The laborer becomes a muscular, square-jawed giant in overalls; the capitalist is depicted as a greedy, rotund plutocrat; the consumer is a wizened, bald-headed, little man with a large family and never ending troubles. Whole nations are concentrated into a single individual possessing the dominant racial characteristics — the dreaming Slav, the volatile Irishman, the reticent Englishman. Who ever thought of a Bolshevik without whiskers? Not only are generalities viewed with particularity, but the thing so visualized is apt to be personified and dramatized. Everyone is like the child who endows her doll with life and imputes human characteristics to bears and mice.

The visualization of a concept varies according to



the previous experiences of the individual. Everyone is continually exposed to innumerable impressions of the things he sees or hears or thinks about. These mental pictures fade and combine, they are retouched by personality, and only the high lights remain in memory.

In the translation of abstract ideas or institutions into concrete symbols each person unconsciously fits them into the background of his own experience. A monarchical government may assume the form of a king, but one man's monarch may be Old King Cole while another remembers George V as he appeared among the soldiers in France. The concept of conservation may be in terms of natural resources, but where the Iowa farmer would see drainage ditches, Mark Twain would have visions of rejuvenated steamboating on the Mississippi, and the joy-rider would be reminded that the supply of gasoline will not last forever. In contrast to these, the Idaho farmer would see irrigation instead of drainage ditches, the engineer of the Keokuk Dam would obstruct the Father of Waters with hydro-electrical plants, while the prospective investor would have visions of gushing oil wells. The generalization is vague and unimpressive, but the symbol is vivid and influential.

#### PUBLIC OPINION

Such is the clay from which public opinion is molded. Given the innate appetite for humanizing



the abstract, which results in impressions peculiar to each individual and infinitely numerous and complex, how do people with feelings so private develop any common will? How does a simple, constant idea emerge from a complex of variables? How is public opinion crystallized?

In the first place the knowledge of no person is so broad that it enables him to form an intelligent judgment on more than a limited number of subjects: he can not choose between the true and the false. Everyone is compelled to establish contact with authorities who constitute the connection with the realm of the unknown. Beginning with parents and teachers the list of trusted experts who are called upon to answer heresy or affirm established doctrine expands to include friends, acquaintances, newspapers, books, and public personages. And so it happens that a few become the leaders of the many. In respect to the great majority of matters that require consideration the individual can do little more than assent or dissent from the opinion of the authorities on each particular subject. But how do the leaders unify issues, as in a political campaign, so that a large group representing every divergence of opinion on particular questions will nevertheless agree on the whole?

One way is to supply a stimulus which will arouse the same response, though for different reasons. Symbols, because they are at once concrete and yet capable of several applications, are admirably



adapted for such use. Suppose one voter dislikes the League of Nations, another detests Woodrow Wilson, while a third dreads the rising power of labor. If a symbol which is the antithesis of what they all hate, say Americanism, can be found, all three can probably be induced to act harmoniously in the name of that symbol. The symbol signifies no one thing, but can be associated with almost anything. It becomes a common bond of similar feelings which were originally aroused by entirely different ideas. When a Presidential candidate appeals for support in the name of Lincoln or Jefferson he is not thinking of Abraham Lincoln or Thomas Jefferson, but rather he hopes to conjure up in the minds of men the idea of harmonious republicanism or liberal democracy of which those names have come to be the symbols. No successful leader neglects the cultivation of symbols: they organize his following and conserve unity.

#### EPIGRAMMATIC SYMBOLISM

There are various methods of expressing ideas by means of symbols. The surest way is in pictures. A painting, a cartoon, or a moving picture compels everyone to see the thing as the artist saw it. Illustration is tyrannical, dogmatic; it brooks no qualification or interpretation; it leaves no room for difference of opinion or personal imagination. But it does make things clear.

Language on the other hand is more flexible.



Words and phrases possess no inherent images, except perhaps to the etymologist. They are open to interpretation. Each person is free to see the ideas expressed in words on the background of his own experience. Verbal symbolism has the advantage of utilizing the personal knowledge of the individual and stimulating thought.

Probably no literary form is better adapted to tickle the fancy and convey an idea clearly than the epigram. A single conception tersely stated and involving an ingenious turn of thought will often present an idea so vividly as to make an indelible impression. The epigram is the handmaiden of the political leader who seeks unifying symbols.

The most successful statesmen are frequently the best phrase makers. Take Roosevelt. Probably no American ever had a larger or more devoted personal following. A partial explanation may be found in his ability to state the vague, half-formulated public sentiment epigrammatically. In the regulation of big business he demanded a "square deal", his attitude toward labor and capital was expressed in the statement that the doors of the White House would "swing open as easily to the wage-worker as to the head of a big corporation — and no easier", his foreign policy was to "speak softly and carry a big stick". President Wilson, who was not always fortunate in his epigrams, led the nation into the war "to make the world safe for democracy". In Iowa politics probably no epigram



is better known than the assertion of Governor Cummins that the protective tariff may operate "as a shelter of monopoly". What a startling vision for the Iowa farmer who hated monopoly! But of all Iowa statesmen no one is more deserving of the epithet, master of the epigram, than Jonathan P. Dolliver.

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