



**THE LIBERAL
IMAGINATION**
LIONEL TRILLING

INTRODUCTION BY
LOUIS MENAND

LIONEL TRILLING (1905–1975) was born in New York and educated at Columbia University, to which he returned as an instructor in 1932, and where he continued to teach in the English Department throughout his long and highly distinguished career as a literary critic. Among the most influential of his many works are three collections of essays, *The Liberal Imagination*, *The Opposing Self*, and *Beyond Culture*; a collection of lectures, *Sincerity and Authenticity*; a critical study of E. M. Forster; and one novel, *The Middle of the Journey* (available as an NYRB Classic). *The Journey Abandoned*, an unfinished novel, was published posthumously in 2008. Lionel Trilling was married to the writer and critic Diana Trilling.

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THE LIBERAL IMAGINATION

Essays on Literature and Society

LIONEL TRILLING

Introduction by

LOUIS MENAND

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Introduction

The Liberal Imagination made literary criticism matter to people who were not literary critics. Lionel Trilling was forty-five when his book came out, in 1950, and he was hardly unknown. His doctoral dissertation, on Matthew Arnold, was published in 1939 and reviewed with admiration by Edmund Wilson. His study of E.M. Forster, in 1943, was the occasion for a piece in *Time*. A novel, *The Middle of the Journey*, published in 1947, had a less happy reception and disappointing sales, but it was widely noticed. Trilling was a professor at Columbia and a contributor to *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times*. Still, *The Liberal Imagination* was a phenomenon. It sold seventy thousand copies in hardcover and one hundred thousand in paperback. And it changed the role of literature in American intellectual life.

The first thing to say about *The Liberal Imagination* is that it is a cold war book, though that is by no means the last thing to say about it. It appeared around the same time as Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s *The Vital Center*, Richard Crossman's *The God That Failed*, and George Orwell's *1984*—books that belong to the case for a liberal anticommunism. Trilling was certainly a liberal anticommunist. Orwell was one of his heroes: Trilling reviewed *1984* in *The New Yorker* (where he called the book “momentous”), and wrote an introduction to the 1952 reprint of Orwell's exposé of Stalinist hypocrisy and brutality, *Homage to Catalonia* (where he called Orwell “a figure in our lives”). He and his wife, Diana, were members of the American Committee for Cultural Freedom, founded in 1951; and he was prominently associated with *Partisan Review*, which had been, since 1937, the journalistic home of the anticommunist left. Anyone likely to pick up *The Liberal Imagination* in 1950 would have understood it as warning against the dogmatism and philistinism of the fellow-traveling mentality, and, later in his life, Trilling explicitly acknowledged that he had intended the collection to be an attack on Stalinism.

But it's significant that the term “liberal” is never defined in *The Liberal Imagination*. There are, as a matter of political theory, radically different types of liberals. There is, in Isaiah Berlin's famous distinction, the liberal who believes in negative liberty, “freedom from,” and the liberal who believes in positive liberty, “freedom for.” There is the liberalism of markets and individualism, and there is the liberalism of planning and the collective. Someone who thinks that hate speech should be banned is usually called a liberal, but someone who thinks that freedom of speech should be absolute is usually a liberal, too. In Trilling's time, the division between liberal anticommunists and liberal anti-anticommunists, minor as it might appear from a historical distance (most anti-anticommunists were not pro-communist), seemed unbridgeable. Some liberals argued that membership in the Communist Party disqualified a person from teaching or from joining a labor union, and some disagreed. So when, in the introduction to *The Liberal Imagination*, Trilling says, “in the United States at this time liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition,” he is indicating, in an elliptical fashion that was characteristic of his style, that he is treating all liberals alike.

For a key perception of the book is that most human beings are not ideologues; intellectual coherence is not a notable feature of their politics. People's political views

may be rigid but they are not necessarily rigorous. They tend to derive from, or to be reflections of, some mixture of sentiment, custom, and moral aspiration. Trilling's point is that this does not make those views any less potent in the political world; on the contrary, it's the unexamined attitudes and assumptions—the things that people take to be merely matters of manners or taste, and nothing so consequential as political positions—that require and repay critical analysis. “Unless we insist that politics is imagination and mind,” as he puts it in the essay on *Partisan Review*, “we will learn that imagination and mind are politics, and of a kind we will not like.”

In Trilling's view, the assumption all liberals share, whether they are Soviet apologists, Hayekian free marketers, or subscribers to *Partisan Review*, is that people are perfectible. A liberal is someone who believes that the right economic system, the right political reforms, the right curriculum, the right psychotherapy, and the right moral posture will do away with unfairness, snobbery, resentment, prejudice, tragic conflict, and neurosis. A liberal is a person who thinks that there is a straight road to health and happiness. The claim of *The Liberal Imagination* is that literature teaches that life is not so simple—for unfairness, snobbery, resentment, prejudice, tragic conflict, and neurosis are literature's particular subject matter. This is why literary criticism has something to say about politics. Not every work of literature conduces to an awareness of the kind of complication that Trilling wants liberalism to confront, of course. *The Liberal Imagination* is a descendant of *Culture and Anarchy* (1867), another book intended to chasten the liberalism of its day, and Trilling uses “literature” in the same way that Arnold used “culture” and “poetry”: as a general term that actually refers to a select canon. Patrolling the boundaries of that canon turns out to be one of the critic's chief duties. A generation of critics, many of them inspired by Trilling's example, rose to the task.

Two lessons can be drawn from the way literature is treated in *The Liberal Imagination*, and they point in very different directions. The first lesson, and the most influential, is that there are more and less politically hygienic works of literature, and the function of criticism is to identify them and to explain why they tend to good or bad political consequences—a job that requires special skill, since a book's politics may be quite different from its political consequences. “Dreiser and James: with that juxtaposition we are immediately at the dark and bloody crossroads where literature and politics meets. One does not go there gladly, but nowadays it is not exactly a matter of free choice whether one does or does not go.... The liberal judgment of Dreiser and James goes back of politics, goes back to the cultural assumptions that makes politics.” The business about the dark and bloody crossroads, with its reminiscences of Arnold's ignorant armies and Oedipus's parricidal moment, is pretty dramatic: it makes it seem as though a lot is at stake in getting books right. It assigns literary criticism a mission. Although not much actual blood was spilled over James or Frost or T. S. Eliot in the literary wars of the 1950s and '60s, the spirit of battle animated criticism.

But the idea that people have some sort of moral obligation to match up their taste in art and literature with their political opinions exercised a much more powerful appeal in Trilling's time than it does today. When *Partisan Review* made its break with the Popular Front, it did so by embracing modernist art and literature. That gesture was intended as, in itself, a political act. And the editors were not simply proposing that

modernist art and literature could be appreciated regardless of one's politics; they were committed to explaining why an appreciation for modernism was consistent with political progressivism. *The Liberal Imagination* is one of the places where that case was advanced, notably by the prominence given to Henry James, generally regarded, at the time, as a writer infatuated with the manners of the upper classes and as the practitioner of rarefied aestheticism. The *Partisan* case was advanced as well by Trilling's insistence that what commends modernist writing to progressive readers is, precisely, the challenge it often makes to progressive belief: "The contemporary authors we most wish to read and most wish to admire for their literary qualities demand of us a great agility and ingenuity in coping with their antagonism to our social and political ideals."

Since the 1960s, though, cultural taste has largely been liberated from politics. Magazines of opinion still use the back of the book to restate the views expressed in the front, but, in liberal societies, educated people tend to be culturally promiscuous and permissive. They don't use the language of approval and disapproval in their aesthetic responses; they simply like some experiences and dislike other experiences. For most people, it just doesn't *matter* whether someone prefers Dreiser or James. Art and literature are understood to be too polysemous to sustain a politics. This has given criticism less moral and political work to do. If there are bloody crossroads out there needing the attention of the critical intellect, the novel does not seem to run through them.

Trilling agonized over his writing. He was a man of many drafts, and his prose shows the trouble he took with it. It reads as though it was written by a man who worried that an imperfectly balanced thought could create an opening, however small, through which totalitarian impulses might creep. But balancing a thought was the essence of Trilling's genius. His characteristic sentences turn in on themselves; they can sometimes seem self-negating. "To suppose that we can think like men of another time is as much of an illusion as to suppose that we can think in a wholly different way." "The poet, it is true, is an effect of environment, but we must remember that he is no less a cause." "We who are liberal and progressive know that the poor are our equals in every sense except that of being equal to us." On the Kinsey Report: "Perhaps only science could undertake the task of freeing sexuality from science itself."

The cast of the mind that produced these sentences is not paradoxical; it is dialectical. Trilling saw everything under a double aspect: as cause and effect, progress and reaction, recognition and self-deception. He saw that art and idea are functions of what they define themselves against, that oppositional attitudes are produced by, in a sense are complicit in, the attitudes they oppose. Culture is a dog chasing its own tail: there is a head and there is a tail, but they are always changing places, and they are part of the same system. Yesterday's scandal is today's sacred cow. This is not simply an irony of modernity; it is in the nature of art and ideas themselves. The consequence—and this is the second and more difficult lesson of the way Trilling treats literature in *The Liberal Imagination*—is that there is no stable point outside a culture from which to critique it. The adversarial and the subversive have a place within the system; they are creations of the system; the system cannot survive without them. This is something that is easy to see once you look at culture in the way anthropologists do, and that is

increasingly the way Trilling looked at it.

The anthropological perspective makes it a problem to explain how novels and poems can supplement politics in straightforwardly beneficent ways. Trilling never dropped the moralist aspiration of his criticism, and he did not abandon his canon, but he fretted about the usefulness of it all. He saw that the literature he admired could be readily enlisted in the justification of developments he feared might be pernicious. Laurentian sexual radicalism, for example, has one kind of meaning in a society where sex is carefully regulated, since it forces readers to confront their own prejudices and practices; it has a completely different meaning in a sexually permissive society, where it merely ratifies what has become frictionless and, Trilling thought, deprived of the resistance that builds character. But was Lawrence's work, in its day, simply a step in the process by which liberal society worked toward the ideal of a relatively conscience-free sexual life? Even in *The Liberal Imagination*, a book with a clear polemical purpose, ambivalence about the educative value of literature lurks in the background of many of the essays. That ambivalence became explicit in the books that followed—*The Opposing Self* (1955), *Beyond Culture* (1965), *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972), and the posthumous collection, *The Last Decade* (1979).

Beginning with *The Opposing Self*, commentators regularly accused Trilling of backing off from the spirit of political engagement that distinguishes his early essays. In the 1960s, some of the criticisms came from Trilling's own former Columbia students. But those critics were still wedded to the belief that art is the advance guard of progress, that literature can make the world ready for political change. Trilling was only being true to the impulses of his temperament in following out the logic of his dialectical thinking and applying it to his own prescriptions. He still worried too much about culture; he exaggerated the effect that fashions and taste can have on ordinary life. He could be a cultural hypochondriac, anxious not to be infected by an unworthy experience. But he also worried that worrying too much about culture misses what matters to ordinary life. For me, Trilling's skepticism about the critical program for which he became celebrated, his ability to think the limits of his own thought, is the finest thing in his work, and the most valuable piece of his intellectual legacy.

—LOUIS MENAND

THE LIBERAL IMAGINATION

Preface

The essays of this volume were written over the last ten years, the greater number within the last three or four years. I have substantially revised almost all of them, but I have not changed the original intent of any. The bibliographical note indicates the circumstances of their first publication. For permission to reprint them here I am grateful to *The American Quarterly*, *Horizon*, *Kenyon Review*, *The Nation*, *The New Leader*, *The New York Times Book Review*, and *Partisan Review*, and the Columbia University Press, The Dial Press, The Macmillan Company, New Directions, and Rinehart and Company.

Although the essays are diverse in subject, they have, I believe, a certain unity. One way, perhaps the quickest way, of suggesting what this unity is might be to say that it derives from an abiding interest in the ideas of what we loosely call liberalism, especially the relation of these ideas to literature.

In the United States at this time liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition. For it is the plain fact that nowadays there are no conservative or reactionary ideas in general circulation. This does not mean, of course, that there is no impulse to conservatism or to reaction. Such impulses are certainly very strong, perhaps even stronger than most of us know. But the conservative impulse and the reactionary impulse do not, with some isolated and some ecclesiastical exceptions, express themselves in ideas but only in action or in irritable mental gestures which seek to resemble ideas.

This intellectual condition of conservatism and reaction will perhaps seem to some liberals a fortunate thing. When we say that a movement is “bankrupt of ideas” we are likely to suppose that it is at the end of its powers. But this is not so, and it is dangerous for us to suppose that it is so, as the experience of Europe in the last quarter-century suggests, for in the modern situation it is just when a movement despairs of having ideas that it turns to force, which it masks in ideology. What is more, it is not conducive to the real strength of liberalism that it should occupy the intellectual field alone. In the course of one of the essays of this book I refer to a remark of John Stuart Mill’s in his famous article on Coleridge—Mill, at odds with Coleridge all down the intellectual and political line, nevertheless urged all liberals to become acquainted with this powerful conservative mind. He said that the prayer of every true partisan of liberalism should be, “‘Lord, enlighten thou our enemies...’; sharpen their wits, give acuteness to their perceptions and consecutiveness and clearness to their reasoning powers. We are in danger from their folly, not from their wisdom: their weakness is what fills us with apprehension, not their strength.” What Mill meant, of course, was that the intellectual pressure which an opponent like Coleridge could exert would force liberals to examine their position for its weaknesses and complacencies.

We cannot very well set about to contrive opponents who will do us the service of forcing us to become more intelligent, who will require us to keep our ideas from becoming stale, habitual, and inert. This we will have to do for ourselves. It has for some time seemed to me that a criticism which has at heart the interests of liberalism might find its most useful work not in confirming liberalism in its sense of general

rightness but rather in putting under some degree of pressure the liberal ideas and assumptions of the present time. If liberalism is, as I believe it to be, a large tendency rather than a concise body of doctrine, then, as that large tendency makes itself explicit, certain of its particular expressions are bound to be relatively weaker than others, and some even useless and mistaken. If this is so, then for liberalism to be aware of the weak or wrong expressions of itself would seem to be an advantage to the tendency as a whole.

Goethe says somewhere that there is no such thing as a liberal idea, that there are only liberal sentiments. This is true. Yet it is also true that certain sentiments consort only with certain ideas and not with others. What is more, sentiments become ideas by a natural and imperceptible process. “Our continued influxes of feeling,” said Wordsworth, “are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings.” And Charles Péguy said. “*Tout commence en mystique et finit en politique*”—everything begins in sentiment and assumption and finds its issue in political action and institutions. The converse is also true: just as sentiments become ideas, ideas eventually establish themselves as sentiments.

If this is so, if between sentiments and ideas there is a natural connection so close as to amount to a kind of identity, then the connection between literature and politics will be seen as a very immediate one. And this will seem especially true if we do not intend the narrow but the wide sense of the word politics. It is the wide sense of the word that is nowadays forced upon us, for clearly it is no longer possible to think of politics except as the politics of culture, the organization of human life toward some end or other, toward the modification of sentiments, which is to say the quality of human life. The word liberal is a word primarily of political import, but its political meaning defines itself by the quality of life it envisages, by the sentiments it desires to affirm. This will begin to explain why a writer of literary criticism involves himself with political considerations. These are not political essays, they are essays in literary criticism. But they assume the inevitable intimate, if not always obvious, connection between literature and politics.

The making of the connection requires, as I have implied, no great ingenuity, nor any extravagant manipulation of the word literature or, beyond taking it in the large sense specified, of the word politics. It is a connection which is quickly understood and as quickly made and acted upon by certain governments. And although it is often resisted by many very good literary critics, it has for some time been accepted with enthusiasm by the most interesting of our creative writers; the literature of the modern period, of the last century and a half, has been characteristically political. Of the writers of the last hundred and fifty years who command our continuing attention, the very large majority have in one way or another turned their passions, their adverse, critical, and very intense passions, upon the condition of the polity. The preoccupation with the research into the self that has marked this literature, and the revival of the concepts of religion that has marked a notable part of it, do not controvert but rather support the statement about its essential commitment to politics.

When Mill urged liberals to read Coleridge, he had in mind not merely Coleridge’s general power of intellect as it stood in critical opposition to the liberalism of the day; he had also in mind certain particular attitudes and views that sprang, as he believed, from Coleridge’s nature and power as a poet. Mill had learned through direct and

rather terrible experience what the tendency of liberalism was in regard to the sentiments and the imagination. From the famous “crisis” of his youth he had learned, although I believe he never put it in just this way, that liberalism stood in a paradoxical relation to the emotions. The paradox is that liberalism is concerned with the emotions above all else, as proof of which the word happiness stands at the very center of its thought, but in its effort to establish the emotions, or certain among them, in some sort of freedom, liberalism somehow tends to deny them in their full possibility. Dickens' *Hard Times* serves to remind us that the liberal principles upon which Mill was brought up, although extreme, were not isolated and unique, and the principles of Mill's rearing very nearly destroyed him, as in fact they did destroy the Louisa Gradgrind of Dickens' novel. And nothing is more touching than the passionate gratitude which Mill gave to poetry for having restored him to the possibility of an emotional life after he had lived in a despairing apathy which brought him to the verge of suicide. That is why, although his political and metaphysical disagreement with Coleridge was extreme, he so highly valued Coleridge's politics and metaphysics—he valued them because they were a poet's, and he hoped that they might modify liberalism's tendency to envisage the world in what he called a “prosaic” way and recall liberals to a sense of variousness and possibility. Nor did he think that there was only a private emotional advantage to be gained from the sense of variousness and possibility—he believed it to be an intellectual and political necessity.

Contemporary liberalism does not depreciate emotion in the abstract, and in the abstract it sets great store by variousness and possibility. Yet, as is true of any other human entity, the conscious and the unconscious life of liberalism are not always in accord. So far as liberalism is active and positive, so far, that is, as it moves toward organization, it tends to select the emotions and qualities that are most susceptible of organization. As it carries out its active and positive ends it unconsciously limits its view of the world to what it can deal with, and it unconsciously tends to develop theories and principles, particularly in relation to the nature of the human mind, that justify its limitation. Its characteristic paradox appears again, and in another form, for in the very interests of its great primal act of imagination by which it establishes its essence and existence—in the interests, that is, of its vision of a general enlargement and freedom and rational direction of human life—it drifts toward a denial of the emotions and the imagination. And in the very interest of affirming its confidence in the power of the mind, it inclines to constrict and make mechanical its conception of the nature of mind. Mill, to refer to him a last time, understood from his own experience that the imagination was properly the joint possession of the emotions and the intellect, that it was fed by the emotions, and that without it the intellect withers and dies, that without it the mind cannot work and cannot properly conceive itself. I do not know whether or not Mill had particularly in mind a sentence from the passage from Thomas Burnet's *Archaeologiae Philosophicae* which Coleridge quotes as the epigraph to *The Ancient Mariner*, the sentence in which Burnet says that a judicious belief in the existence of demons has the effect of keeping the mind from becoming “narrow, and lapsed entirely into mean thoughts,” but he surely understood what Coleridge, who believed in demons as little as Mill did, intended by his citation of the passage. Coleridge wanted to enforce by that quaint sentence from Burnet what is the general import of *The Ancient Mariner* apart from any more particular doctrine that

exegesis may discover—that the world is a complex and unexpected and terrible place which is not always to be understood by the mind as we use it in our everyday tasks.

It is one of the tendencies of liberalism to simplify, and this tendency is natural in view of the effort which liberalism makes to organize the elements of life in a rational way. And when we approach liberalism in a critical spirit, we shall fail in critical completeness if we do not take into account the value and necessity of its organizational impulse. But at the same time we must understand that organization means delegation, and agencies, and bureaus, and technicians, and that the ideas that can survive delegation, that can be passed on to agencies and bureaus and technicians, incline to be ideas of a certain kind and of a certain simplicity: they give up something of their largeness and modulation and complexity in order to survive. The lively sense of contingency and possibility, and of those exceptions to the rule which may be the beginning of the end of the rule—this sense does not suit well with the impulse to organization. So that when we come to look at liberalism in a critical spirit, we have to expect that there will be a discrepancy between what I have called the primal imagination of liberalism and its present particular manifestations.

The job of criticism would seem to be, then, to recall liberalism to its first essential imagination of variousness and possibility, which implies the awareness of complexity and difficulty. To the carrying out of the job of criticizing the liberal imagination, literature has a unique relevance, not merely because so much of modern literature has explicitly directed itself upon politics, but more importantly because literature is the human activity that takes the fullest and most precise account of variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty.

L.T.
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To Jacques Barzun

Reality in America

i

It is possible to say of V. L. Parrington that with his *Main Currents in American Thought* he has had an influence on our conception of American culture which is not equaled by that of any other writer of the last two decades. His ideas are now the accepted ones wherever the college course in American literature is given by a teacher who conceives himself to be opposed to the genteel and the academic and in alliance with the vigorous and the actual. And whenever the liberal historian of America finds occasion to take account of the national literature, as nowadays he feels it proper to do, it is Parrington who is his standard and guide. Parrington's ideas are the more firmly established because they do not have to be imposed—the teacher or the critic who presents them is likely to find that his task is merely to make articulate for his audience what it has always believed, for Parrington formulated in a classic way the suppositions about our culture which are held by the American middle class so far as that class is at all liberal in its social thought and so far as it begins to understand that literature has anything to do with society.

Parrington was not a great mind; he was not a precise thinker or, except when measured by the low eminences that were about him, an impressive one. Separate Parrington from his informing idea of the economic and social determination of thought and what is left is a simple intelligence, notable for its generosity and enthusiasm but certainly not for its accuracy or originality. Take him even with his idea and he is, once its direction is established, rather too predictable to be continuously interesting; and, indeed, what we dignify with the name of economic and social determinism amounts in his use of it to not much more than the demonstration that most writers incline to stick to their own social class. But his best virtue was real and important—he had what we like to think of as the saving salt of the American mind, the lively sense of the practical, workaday world, of the welter of ordinary undistinguished things and people, of the tangible, quirky, unrefined elements of life. He knew what so many literary historians do not know, that emotions and ideas are the sparks that fly when the mind meets difficulties.

Yet he had after all but a limited sense of what constitutes a difficulty. Whenever he was confronted with a work of art that was complex, personal and not literal, that was not, as it were, a public document, Parrington was at a loss. Difficulties that were complicated by personality or that were expressed in the language of successful art did not seem quite real to him and he was inclined to treat them as aberrations, which is one way of saying what everybody admits, that the weakest part of Parrington's talent was his aesthetic judgment. His admirers and disciples like to imply that his errors of aesthetic judgment are merely lapses of taste, but this is not so. Despite such mistakes as his notorious praise of Cabell, to whom in a remarkable passage he compares Melville, Parrington's taste was by no means bad. His errors are the errors of understanding which arise from his assumptions about the nature of reality.

Parrington does not often deal with abstract philosophical ideas, but whenever he

approaches a work of art we are made aware of the metaphysics on which his aesthetics is based. There exists, he believes, a thing called *reality*; it is one and immutable, it is wholly external, it is irreducible. Men's minds may waver, but reality is always reliable, always the same, always easily to be known. And the artist's relation to reality he conceives as a simple one. Reality being fixed and given, the artist has but to let it pass through him, he is the lens in the first diagram of an elementary book on optics: Fig 1, Reality; Fig. 2, Artist; Fig. 1', Work of Art. Figs. 1 and 1' are normally in virtual correspondence with each other. Sometimes the artist spoils this ideal relation by "turning away from" reality. This results in certain fantastic works, unreal and ultimately useless. It does not occur to Parrington that there is any other relation possible between the artist and reality than this passage of reality through the transparent artist; he meets evidence of imagination and creativeness with a settled hostility the expression of which suggests that he regards them as the natural enemies of democracy.

In this view of things, reality, although it is always reliable, is always rather sober-sided, even grim. Parrington, a genial and enthusiastic man, can understand how the generosity of man's hopes and desires may leap beyond reality; he admires will in the degree that he suspects mind. To an excess of desire and energy which blinds a man to the limitations of reality he can indeed be very tender. This is one of the many meanings he gives to *romance* or *romanticism*, and in spite of himself it appeals to something in his own nature. The praise of Cabell is Parrington's response not only to Cabell's elegance—for Parrington loved elegance—but also to Cabell's insistence on the part which a beneficent self-deception may and even should play in the disappointing fact-bound life of man, particularly in the private and erotic part of his life.^[1]

The second volume of *Main Currents* is called *The Romantic Revolution in America* and it is natural to expect that the word romantic should appear in it frequently. So it does, more frequently than one can count, and seldom with the same meaning, seldom with the sense that the word, although scandalously vague as it has been used by the literary historians, is still full of complicated but not wholly pointless ideas, that it involves many contrary but definable things; all too often Parrington uses the word romantic with the word romance close at hand, meaning *a* romance, in the sense that *Graustark* or *Treasure Island* is a romance, as though it signified chiefly a gay disregard of the limitations of everyday fact. Romance is refusing to heed the counsels of experience (p. iii); it is ebullience (p. iv); it is utopianism (p. iv); it is individualism (p. vi); it is self-deception (p. 59)—"romantic faith ... in the beneficent processes of trade and industry" (as held, we inevitably ask, by the romantic Adam Smith?); it is the love of the picturesque (p. 49); it is the dislike of innovation (p. 50) but also the love of change (p. iv); it is the sentimental (p. 192); it is patriotism, and then it is cheap (p. 235). It may be used to denote what is not classical, but chiefly it means that which ignores reality (pp. ix, 136, 143, 147, and *passim*); it is not critical (pp. 225, 235), although in speaking of Cooper and Melville, Parrington admits that criticism can sometimes spring from romanticism.

Whenever a man with whose ideas he disagrees wins from Parrington a reluctant measure of respect, the word romantic is likely to appear. He does not admire Henry Clay, yet something in Clay is not to be despised—his romanticism, although Clay's

romanticism is made equivalent with his inability to “come to grips with reality.” Romanticism is thus, in most of its significations, the venial sin of *Main Currents*; like carnal passion in the *Inferno*, it evokes not blame but tender sorrow. But it can also be the great and saving virtue which Parrington recognizes. It is ascribed to the transcendental reformers he so much admires; it is said to mark two of his most cherished heroes, Jefferson and Emerson: “they were both romantics and their idealism was only a different expression of a common spirit.” Parrington held, we may say, at least two different views of romanticism which suggest two different views of reality. Sometimes he speaks of reality in an honorific way, meaning the substantial stuff of life, the ineluctable facts with which the mind must cope, but sometimes he speaks of it pejoratively and means the world of established social forms; and he speaks of realism in two ways: sometimes as the power of dealing intelligently with fact, sometimes as a cold and conservative resistance to idealism.

Just as for Parrington there is a saving grace and a venial sin, there is also a deadly sin, and this is turning away from reality, not in the excess of generous feeling, but in what he believes to be a deficiency of feeling, as with Hawthorne, or out of what amounts to sinful pride, as with Henry James. He tells us that there was too much realism in Hawthorne to allow him to give his faith to the transcendental reformers: “he was too much of a realist to change fashions in creeds”; “he remained cold to the revolutionary criticism that was eager to pull down the old temples to make room for nobler.” It is this cold realism, keeping Hawthorne apart from his enthusiastic contemporaries, that alienates Parrington’s sympathy—“Eager souls, mystics and revolutionaries, may propose to refashion the world in accordance with their dreams; but evil remains, and so long as it lurks in the secret places of the heart, utopia is only the shadow of a dream. And so while the Concord thinkers were proclaiming man to be the indubitable child of God, Hawthorne was critically examining the question of evil as it appeared in the light of his own experience. It was the central fascinating problem of his intellectual life, and in pursuit of a solution he probed curiously into the hidden, furtive recesses of the soul.” Parrington’s disapproval of the enterprise is unmistakable.

Now we might wonder whether Hawthorne’s questioning of the naïve and often eccentric faiths of the transcendental reformers was not, on the face of it, a public service. But Parrington implies that it contributes nothing to democracy, and even that it stands in the way of the realization of democracy. If democracy depends wholly on a fighting faith, I suppose he is right. Yet society is after all something that exists at the moment as well as in the future, and if one man wants to probe curiously into the hidden furtive recesses of the contemporary soul, a broad democracy and especially one devoted to reality should allow him to do so without despising him. If what Hawthorne did was certainly nothing to build a party on, we ought perhaps to forgive him when we remember that he was only one man and that the future of mankind did not depend upon him alone. But this very fact serves only to irritate Parrington; he is put out by Hawthorne’s loneliness and believes that part of Hawthorne’s insufficiency as a writer comes from his failure to get around and meet people. Hawthorne could not, he tells us, establish contact with the “Yankee reality,” and was scarcely aware of the “substantial world of Puritan reality that Samuel Sewall knew.”

To turn from reality might mean to turn to romance, but Parrington tells us that

Hawthorne was romantic “only in a narrow and very special sense.” He was not interested in the world of, as it were, practical romance, in the Salem of the clipper ships; from this he turned away to create “a romance of ethics.” This is not an illuminating phrase but it is a catching one, and it might be taken to mean that Hawthorne was in the tradition of, say, Shakespeare; but we quickly learn that, no, Hawthorne had entered a barren field, for although he himself lived in the present and had all the future to mold, he preferred to find many of his subjects in the past. We learn too that his romance of ethics is not admirable because it requires the hard, fine pressing of ideas, and we are told that “a romantic uninterested in adventure and afraid of sex is likely to become somewhat graveled for matter.” In short, Hawthorne’s mind was a thin one, and Parrington puts in evidence his use of allegory and symbol and the very severity and precision of his art to prove that he suffered from a sadly limited intellect, for so much fancy and so much art could scarcely be needed unless the writer were trying to exploit to the utmost the few poor ideas that he had.

Hawthorne, then, was “forever dealing with shadows, and he knew that he was dealing with shadows.” Perhaps so, but shadows are also part of reality and one would not want a world without shadows, it would not even be a “real” world. But we must get beyond Parrington’s metaphor. The fact is that Hawthorne was dealing beautifully with realities, with substantial things. The man who could raise those brilliant and serious doubts about the nature and possibility of moral perfection, the man who could keep himself aloof from the “Yankee reality” and who could dissent from the orthodoxies of dissent and tell us so much about the nature of moral zeal, is of course dealing exactly with reality.

Parrington’s characteristic weakness as a historian is suggested by his title, for the culture of a nation is not truly figured in the image of the current. A culture is not a flow, nor even a confluence; the form of its existence is struggle, or at least debate—it is nothing if not a dialectic. And in any culture there are likely to be certain artists who contain a large part of the dialectic within themselves, their meaning and power lying in their contradictions; they contain within themselves, it may be said, the very essence of the culture, and the sign of this is that they do not submit to serve the ends of any one ideological group or tendency. It is a significant circumstance of American culture, and one which is susceptible of explanation, that an unusually large proportion of its notable writers of the nineteenth century were such repositories of the dialectic of their times—they contained both the yes and the no of their culture, and by that token they were prophetic of the future. Parrington said that he had not set up shop as a literary critic; but if a literary critic is simply a reader who has the ability to understand literature and to convey to others what he understands, it is not exactly a matter of free choice whether or not a cultural historian shall be a literary critic, nor is it open to him to let his virtuous political and social opinions do duty for percipience. To throw out Poe because he cannot be conveniently fitted into a theory of American culture, to speak of him as a biological sport and as a mind apart from the main current, to find his gloom to be merely personal and eccentric, “only the atrabilious wretchedness of a dipsomaniac,” as Hawthorne’s was “no more than the skeptical questioning of life by a nature that knew no fierce storms,” to judge Melville’s response to American life to be less noble than that of Bryant or of Greeley, to speak of Henry James as an escapist, as an artist similar to Whistler, a man characteristically

afraid of stress—this is not merely to be mistaken in aesthetic judgment; rather it is to examine without attention and from the point of view of a limited and essentially arrogant conception of reality the documents which are in some respects the most suggestive testimony to what America was and is, and of course to get no answer from them.

Parrington lies twenty years behind us, and in the intervening time there has developed a body of opinion which is aware of his inadequacies and of the inadequacies of his coadjutors and disciples, who make up what might be called the literary academicism of liberalism. Yet Parrington still stands at the center of American thought about American culture because, as I say, he expresses the chronic American belief that there exists an opposition between reality and mind and that one must enlist oneself in the party of reality.

ii

This belief in the incompatibility of mind and reality is exemplified by the doctrinaire indulgence which liberal intellectuals have always displayed toward Theodore Dreiser, an indulgence which becomes the worthier of remark when it is contrasted with the liberal severity toward Henry James. Dreiser and James: with that juxtaposition we are immediately at the dark and bloody crossroads where literature and politics meet. One does not go there gladly, but nowadays it is not exactly a matter of free choice whether one does or does not go. As for the particular juxtaposition itself, it is inevitable and it has at the present moment far more significance than the juxtaposition which once used to be made between James and Whitman. It is not hard to contrive factitious oppositions between James and Whitman, but the real difference between them is the difference between the moral mind, with its awareness of tragedy, irony, and multitudinous distinctions, and the transcendental mind, with its passionate sense of the oneness of multiplicity. James and Whitman are unlike not in quality but in kind, and in their very opposition they serve to complement each other. But the difference between James and Dreiser is not of kind, for both men addressed themselves to virtually the same social and moral fact. The difference here is one of quality, and perhaps nothing is more typical of American liberalism than the way it has responded to the respective qualities of the two men.

Few critics, I suppose, no matter what their political disposition, have ever been wholly blind to James's great gifts, or even to the grandiose moral intention of these gifts. And few critics have ever been wholly blind to Dreiser's great faults. But by liberal critics James is traditionally put to the ultimate question: of what use, of what actual political use, are his gifts and their intention? Granted that James was devoted to an extraordinary moral perceptiveness, granted too that moral perceptiveness has something to do with politics and the social life, of what possible practical value in our world of impending disaster can James's work be? And James's style, his characters, his subjects, and even his own social origin and the manner of his personal life are adduced to show that his work cannot endure the question. To James no quarter is given by American criticism in its political and liberal aspect. But in the same degree that liberal criticism is moved by political considerations to treat James with severity,