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**AFTER PROGRESS: DEFINING AMERICAN POLITICAL AND CULTURAL  
MATURITY IN THE 1940s AND 1950s**

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by

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## ABSTRACT

In the middle of the twentieth century, a circle of influential intellectuals living in New York City believed that American culture, along with world civilization, had reached a crucial turning point. In a world characterized by global war, genocide, and the prospect of atomic destruction, they felt that classic liberalism had failed Western culture, and, indeed, that it had failed them personally as well. Their solution was an ideology that combined an anti-radicalism that rejected the extremes of both the left and the right, with cultural modernism, which eventually became a component of Cold War liberal ideology during the 1950s and the early 1960s. They expressed their views through literary criticism, historiography, and social science with a qualitative emphasis. These intellectuals were originally part of the anti-Stalinist left, and they were especially associated with the journal *Partisan Review*. The work of several intellectuals is examined, including Philip Rahv, William Phillips, Dwight Macdonald, William Barrett, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., John Crowe Ransom, F.O. Matthiessen, Irving Howe, Sidney Hook, but the work of Lionel Trilling, Richard Chase, and Richard Hofstadter are subjected to detailed scrutiny. The work of Trilling, Chase and Hofstadter are held as paradigmatic examples of a particular anti-radical Cold War liberal discourse that was concerned with the relationship between personality and individual psychological development, and ideology.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the middle of the twentieth century, a circle of influential intellectuals living in New York City believed that American culture, along with world civilization, had reached a crucial turning point. In a world characterized by global war, genocide, and the prospect of atomic destruction, they felt that classic liberalism had failed Western culture, and, indeed, that it had failed them personally as well. The historical problems they perceived were not, in their eyes, caused by impersonal forces or totalitarian regimes, but rather by a liberal mind-set that tended to phrase issues abstractly, to look for clear and absolute answers, and that was far too credulous about the ability of human beings to secure progress by a combination of rationality and determination. For these intellectuals, the Enlightenment, and its long legacy in the West, could no longer be the sole guide of human affairs. They retained Enlightenment values selectively, but also argued that anyone interested in perpetuating a democratic legacy must appreciate the complexity and concreteness of life and must eschew abstract ideologies that ignore these tangible qualities. Literature and literary criticism were often their vehicles for exploring human issues precisely because imaginative thinking almost by necessity took account of the nuances of life. Historical writing and a qualitative approach to social science also satisfied their insistence on a concrete or realistic view of reality. Finally, they had a distaste for conventional political discourse -- that is, the ideological dichotomy of the left and the right that had dominated Western political discourse since the French Revolution. They believed that this ideological dichotomy led to abstraction and

tendency toward dogmatic formulations at the expense of genuine understanding. At the same time, however, their writings in effect served a political function, though often indirectly.

This viewpoint grew out of the intellectual and political atmosphere of New York in the 1930s. During this time, intellectuals on the left waged fierce sectarian battles between those who supported -- either directly as a party member or indirectly as a fellow traveler -- the Communist Party, which was closely aligned with Moscow, and those radicals who believed that the Soviet Union had betrayed the principles of Marx. The most intense conflict started early in the decade as supporters of the exiled Soviet leader, Leon Trotsky, either left or were expelled from the American Communist Party (CPUSA). But there were other conflicts and disagreements among left-wing intellectuals. At the start of the thirties -- known as the so-called "Third Period" of the CPUSA -- the party strongly denounced liberals and socialists who believed that reform could still be achieved through conventional American politics. But in 1935, when the party reversed its position and called for the formation of a Popular Front and urged its members to form an alliance with socialist and liberals, some radicals left the party because they thought that it had compromised too much. Later, in 1939, many radicals who had been loyal to the Popular Front became utterly disillusioned with the Communist Party after the Soviet Union signed the infamous non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany. This infighting left many intellectuals involved in it with a distaste for ideological partisanship.

There were also political and cultural disputes that were left from the Progressive era and the 1920s. Intellectuals strenuously disagreed over the meaning and implications

of the rise of popular mass culture. Some argued that it could serve the cause of reform, or even have a revolutionary impact by directing and instructing the masses. Other intellectuals urged a defense of traditional high culture, and still others believed that the avant-garde would act as a midwife for the revolution. Another continuing theme was evaluation of the quality and potential of American, or “native,” culture, especially compared with an ostensibly more cosmopolitan European culture. An intellectual’s ethnic and regional background often contributed to his or her viewpoint in these cultural conflicts, but there was no clear consensus in any discrete group. Furthermore, throughout the 1930s political conflicts were tied to arguments over culture and thus matters of taste or aesthetics in art and literature were seen to have great ideological implications.

These ideological battles were fought in a particularly sharp way in the journal, *Partisan Review*. The journal was founded in 1933 and was originally an organ of the John Reed club and was very radical in its orientation, generally supporting the Communist position. As the decade progressed, two of its editors, Philip Rahv and William Phillips, increasingly identified with the Trotskyite positions on political and cultural matters. They were enormously skeptical of the effectiveness of the Popular Front, and from a cultural standpoint they were frustrated with what they understood as the party’s interference with artistic creativity by demanding “socially useful” art. In 1937, Rahv and Phillips, joined by Dwight Macdonald, George L.K. Morris, and F.W. Dupee, reorganized *Partisan Review*, separating it from any Communist association. The five men acted as editors and committed the journal to a two-fold mission. One was to give voice to a political radicalism that was independent of both the Communist Party

and traditional American liberal and progressive organizations. The second part of the *Partisan* mission was to promote a cultural viewpoint that can be described as distinctly modernist. Modern art and literature that could be considered avant-garde was promoted, while commercial mass culture, political propaganda that emanated from the Communist Party, and any rennet mainstream middle-class Victorian culture were condemned.<sup>1</sup>

There arose around *Partisan Review* a circle of intellectuals committed to a critical reevaluation of the past expressions of radicalism. And it was from this circle of intellectuals that in the post-World War II era a movement to reassess radicalism itself emerged. What unified the discourses of these pre-war and post-war movements was their close scrutiny of American progressivism of the first two decades of the twentieth century. This massive turn-of-the-century intellectual and political movement embodied Enlightenment optimism. Indeed, it promised to translate hopes about human initiatives into concrete terms by dramatically reforming society. During the 1930s, however, left-leaning intellectuals wondered about progressivism's adequacy, while the same intellectuals worried again in the 1940s and 1950s about the leftist critique and, more basically, progressivism itself as the world crisis seemed to advance.

The affinity that these intellectuals had for literature as a vehicle for the expression of complexity led them to turn to the literary modernist movement for values and styles. Modernists not only wished to separate literature from Victorian moral values, also to experiment with literary form. They were convinced that the era in which

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<sup>1</sup> For the founding and purpose of the *Partisan Review* see, Judy Kutulas, *The Long War: The Intellectual People's Front and Anti-Stalinism, 1930-1940*, (Durham, N.C., 1995), 126-130; Allen M. Wald, *The New York Intellectuals*, (Chapel Hill, 1987), 77-97; Richard H. Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years*, (New York, 1973), 334-346; Terry A. Cooney, *The Rise of the New York Intellectuals: Partisan Review and Its Circle*, (Madison, Wisconsin, 1986), 38-45; Alexander Bloom, *Prodigal Sons: The New York Intellectuals and Their World*, (New York, 1986), 71-120.

they lived was in some way uniquely different and cut-off from the past. Thus the artistic and cultural forms of the past were inadequate. Overall, the political and ideological implications of modernist aesthetics were extremely varied. However, among New York intellectuals it often led to an impatience with the dichotomy of left and right, as well as with teleological assumptions that supported progressivism and other Enlightenment-derived ideologies. And yet they were still equally skeptical of the ability of the “traditions” of the past -- both in terms of aesthetic conventions and political-social formulas -- to provide useful guidance for the unique problems of modernity. These post-war thinkers were not reactionaries, and perhaps it may be said that their example helped to keep the post-war discourse from moving in a distinctly conservative direction, as well as turning it away from the left. Although these intellectuals were skeptical about the optimism that had sustained Western culture for nearly two centuries, they nevertheless retained faith in reason and the ability of intellectuals to provide society guidance that could help it avoid the pitfalls of the ideological extremism that appeared to dominate the century up until that point.

Throughout this work I refer to this circle of intellectuals as “anti-radical modernists” because of their insistence that extremism from the right and the left was equally destructive and because of their confidence in what they understood as the fundamental assumptions of the political and social system of the post-war United States: reason, limitations on power, a pragmatic or realistic orientation, a recognition of the negative aspects of human nature, and an avoidance of dogma. They were men responding to what they viewed as a crisis of existential proportions -- not only a social crisis, but for them more profoundly, a cultural crisis. This dissertation examines the

evolution of this viewpoint through the interpersonal relationships and intellectual dialogues during the 1940s and 1950s. This approach is personal and detailed because it was through intense exchanges among these men, who were acquaintances and colleagues, that something close to a collective viewpoint took shape. At same time, however, my method seeks to convey differences among them. As brilliant, idiosyncratic, and articulate men, no two took exactly the same approach. This was the source of much of the vitality of the movement.

This dissertation particularly focuses on three individuals who perhaps best embody the core values of this reevaluation of culture and yet also suggest the movement's limitations: Lionel Trilling and his student, Richard Chase, both literary scholars and critics, and Richard Hofstadter, the historian. Socially, these men have much in common. Although Hofstadter did not write for *Partisan Review*, all three men can be considered part of the *Partisan Review* circle. Trilling was an important contributor to *Partisan Review* from the point that Rahv and Phillip reorganized the little magazine as an organ for what might be called anti-Stalinist modernism. Chase was also a contributor to the *Partisan Review*; but more importantly, he was first graduate student that Trilling advised in an official capacity. Much has been written about Trilling, but he was a cautious writer who avoided any too explicit explanation of his political stance.<sup>2</sup> He was also a careful man who avoided the bitter public conflicts that seemed to afflict the New York intellectuals. However, in his correspondence with Chase, Trilling was a bit less guarded. Even more significant though, is how much Chase was guided

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<sup>2</sup> For works specifically on Trilling, see William M. Chace, *Lionel Trilling: Criticism and Politics*, (Stanford, 1980); Steven L. Tanner, *Lionel Trilling*, (Boston, 1988); Mark Krupnick, *Lionel Trilling and the Fate of Cultural Criticism*, (Evanston, Illinois, 1986); Edward Joseph Shoben, Jr., *Lionel Trilling*, (New York, 1981); John Rodden, ed., *Lionel Trilling and His Critics*, (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1999). For an intimate look at Trilling's early career, see Diana Trilling, *The Beginning of the Journey*, (New York, 1993).

intellectually and personally by Trilling's ideas. By looking at the Trilling-Chase relationship during the 1940s, perspective on Trilling is gained.

Like Trilling and Chase, Richard Hofstadter taught at Columbia University throughout the forties and fifties. Naturally, he knew both men there, but even before he got a Ph.D. in 1943, Hofstadter knew most of the *Partisan Review* circle. He was especially close friends with Alfred Kazin, whose 1942 book, *On Native Ground*, has been called historian Richard Pells the "one full-length book to emerge from the *Partisan's* stable."<sup>3</sup> The 1940s were a formative time for Hofstadter. He was politically active during the 1930s and was a veteran of the sectarian struggles of the left. However, it was during the forties that Hofstadter developed his particularly acute critique of progressive era historiography and formulated his own approach toward American history, one that later -- perhaps somewhat unfairly -- would be considered the basis of the so-called consensus school of historiography that dominated the 1950s. Overall, Hofstadter elaborated a theory of American culture and politics that had a profound influence on American liberals during the fifties and can be described as the paradigmatic example of an anti-radical modernist conception of American politics and ideology.

Although these three men are my principle subjects, their exchanges with other leading intellectuals of the day received significant attention as well. Among these figures are John Crowe Ransom, the initiator of the "New Criticism," which was often seen as a rival to the so-called New York critical approach associated with Trilling, F.O. Matthiessen, also a literary critic, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., the historian, and the New York intellectuals, Irving Howe, Alfred Kazin, Clement Greenberg, Dwight Macdonald and William Barrett.

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<sup>3</sup> Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years*, 345.

All of these intellectuals have been examined by other scholars. Many historians have looked at what they call the “de-radicalization” of mid-century American intellectuals -- that is, the process by which intellectuals who had once held radical beliefs abandoned these beliefs and adopted an accommodating Cold War posture.<sup>4</sup> For some historians, among them Steven J. Whitfield, the “de-radicalization” was caused by the extreme anticommunism that arose as a response to the frustrations of the early Cold War. It not only forced intellectuals to retreat from radicalism, but also profoundly distorted American popular culture.<sup>5</sup> Other historians describe de-radicalization in less dramatic terms, seeing it as an almost inevitable product of an intellectual’s professional ambition, and, especially in the case of Jewish intellectuals, a desire to assimilate.<sup>6</sup> Both views describe “de-radicalization” as something that happens to the intellectual due primarily to external circumstance. Whether due to the requirements of professionalism or to the pressure of the Red Scare, intellectuals were forced – some, perhaps, more willingly than others – to the right of the political spectrum. In short, these historians argue that, along with the country as a whole, intellectuals became more conservative and less critical of American society.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The introduction to Alan Wald’s *The New York Intellectuals* has an excellent brief description of the historiography of “de-radicalization.” Wald, *The New York Intellectuals*, 3-26.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War*, 2nd ed., (Baltimore, 1996). For a similar description of the era’s intellectuals, see Mary Sperling McAuliffe, *Crisis on the Left: Cold War Politics and American Liberals, 1947-1954*, (Amherst, 1978).

<sup>6</sup> The link between “de-radicalization” and assimilation is addressed by Wald, *The New York Intellectuals*, passim. Judy Kutulas also addresses the issue of ethnicity in her book, *The Long War*. See Kutulas, *The Long War: The Intellectual People's Front and Anti-Stalinism, 1930-1940*, passim. Both authors emphasize the role that left-wing sectarian struggles during the 1930s between the Stalinists and Trotskyites had in creating a distinctive left-wing anticommunism, although they also distinguish anti-Stalinism from de-radicalization.

<sup>7</sup> The aforementioned historians have what could be described as a negative appraisal of de-radicalization. There are, however, many historians who describe these intellectuals in more positive terms. For example, see David A Hollinger, *In The American Province: Studies in the History and Historiography of Ideas*, (Baltimore, 1985). See especially his essay “Ethnic diversity, Cosmopolitanism, and the Emergence of the American Intelligentsia,” (56-73). Hollinger does not ignore the Cold War, but he sees it as accelerating a

I document this intellectual movement to the right as well. However, I differ with most of the above scholars because I argue that much of the reason for the “de-radicalization” of these intellectuals can be found in the discourse itself. This is not to say that I do not believe that external or political events did not affect these intellectuals. They most certainly did. And there was a no doubt tremendous pressure due to career considerations, the general ideological atmosphere, or simply a sense of fatigue that led these intellectuals to abandon their former radical beliefs. Nevertheless, to a certain extent I take much of their discourse at face value and argue that these intellectuals sincerely believed that there were inherent problems in the application of Enlightenment values to twentieth-century problems and who turned to anti-radical modernist thought as a way to resolve this difficulty.

There were two modes of anti-radical modernist expression. One was an aesthetic anti-radicalism, associated particularly with Trilling’s literary criticism, but also – to a lesser degree -- other so-called New York literary critics. Aesthetic anti-radical modernism sought to use literature, especially the novel, to illustrate the difficulties and

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development of a “Modernist” sensibility that, while distinctively American, was nonetheless more cosmopolitan than the provincial Protestant culture that characterized the United States at the turn-of-the-century. Another historian who admires the accomplishments of the mid-century liberal intellectuals is John Patrick Diggins, see John Patrick Diggins, *The Proud Decades: 1941-1960*, (New York, 1988). and John Patrick Diggins, *The Rise and Fall of the American Left*, (New York, 1992). Richard Pells, while describing American intellectuals as becoming more conservative, sees this process more as a product of their disillusionment with Stalinism and their alienation from popular culture. See, Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years*; Richard H. Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s*, 1st ed., (New York, 1985). There are also historians who take a position midway between those who see de-radicalization as a product of and response to the Cold War, and those who insist that American intellectuals were more active in shaping a distinctive mid-century American ideology and culture. Terry A Cooney describes the New York intellectuals as a self-contained community that was influenced by its own internal conflicts and an idealized conception of modernism, rather than national political pressures. See, Cooney, *The Rise of the New York Intellectuals*. Howard Brick and Thomas Schaub recognize the effect of the Cold War on intellectuals, and the institutions that intellectuals worked in, especially the universities, but also see a distinctive form of modernism shaping the response of American intellectuals to Cold War pressures. See, Thomas Hill Schaub, *American Fiction in the Cold War*, (Madison, Wisconsin, 1991); Howard Brick, *Daniel Bell and the Decline of Intellectual Radicalism*, (Madison, 1986).

complications of human existence that a literal-minded liberalism was inclined to overlook. Trilling used his criticism to cultivate a public taste for literature that demonstrated an awareness of human complexity and addressed the tension between the demands of society and an individual's deepest desires. However, unlike the radical left-wing critics of the thirties, or the earlier progressive era critics, Trilling did not believe that literature ought to have a direct political purpose. He saw the Marxist-inspired proletarian novel of the Depression era, and the Darwinian-inspired naturalism of the turn of the century as vulgar and reductionistic depictions of life which tended to accentuate the liberal reader's propensity to oversimplify social problems and to engage in self-righteous moral indignation. Literature could not reform society, Trilling argued, it could only expand, what he called, the "moral imagination."<sup>8</sup>

The other mode of anti-radical modernist expression was social scientific. Hofstadter, for example, used social psychology to explain the origins of the radical right. He employed the concept of "status anxiety" in his work, although Hofstadter modified the concept somewhat. In *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950), Adorno had originally described status anxiety as the root of fascistic and authoritarian political movements. Combining Marxism with Freudianism, he explained how the loss of status by members of the middle class led to anti-Semitism, hyper-nationalism, and a pathological admiration for strong authority figures, as well as other traits characteristic of fascism.<sup>9</sup> Hofstadter understood this phenomenon not -- as the original research described it -- as a set of specific beliefs on specific issues, but rather as a more generalized "paranoid style" of politics, which could be applied not only to contemporary right-wing extremists, but

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<sup>8</sup> Tanner, *Lionel Trilling*, 82.

<sup>9</sup> T.W. Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality*, (New York, 1950), 222-279.

also to left-wing movements such as the populists and the progressives.<sup>10</sup> He used this mode of social analysis to reinforce the need for what he understood as a centrist and non-ideological position.

The aesthetic and social scientific expressions of anti-radical modernism were linked – in the same way that anti-radicalism combined with modernism. Trilling used Freud’s work, in particular *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1929), to inform his literary criticism. Like Hofstadter, Trilling tended to describe political radicalism as a type of psychological pathology. Thus he believed that alienation was not so much a historical product of capitalism, as Marx argued, but rather the inevitable result of the tensions between society’s expectations (or the superego) and the desires of the individual (or the id). The mature mind understood and reconciled this situation (presumably in the ego). An immature mind, in contrast, Trilling believed, resorted to a kind of wishful thinking and lost itself in radical ideology. Indeed, Trilling took his understanding of ideology from Freud’s description of religion. He saw both as seductive illusions.

Hofstadter, in turn, was influenced by Trilling’s work. He first began to reevaluate the early twentieth century progressives when he read Trilling’s critique of the progressive literary critic, Vernon Parrington.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Hofstadter drew upon a social scientific tradition that was congenial to an aesthetic or humanistic approach to

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<sup>10</sup> See Hofstadter’s work on the populists and progressives in Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: from Bryan to F.D.R.*, (New York, 1955). Hofstadter borrowed heavily from Edward Shils’s essay “Authoritarianism, ‘Right’ and ‘Left,’” in Richard Christie and Marie Jahoda, *Studies in the Scope and Method of "The Authoritarian Personality"*, (Glencoe, Ill., 1954).

<sup>11</sup> Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, eds., *The Hofstadter Aegis*, (New York, 1974). 321-322. Also Brinkley writes, “Hofstadter told friends that he had read everything that Trilling had written,” in Alan Brinkley, *Liberalism and Its Discontents*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), 135. The Trilling essay referred to is “Reality in America,” see Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, Uniform Edition ed., (New York, 1978), 1-10. This essay was first published in 1940 in *Partisan Review*.

understanding culture. He was associated with several American sociologists – including Edward Shils, Robert K. Merton, and radical sociologist C. Wright Mills – who were moving away from the positivistic and behaviorist paradigm that dominated American sociology to a European model, first formulated by Max Weber and elaborated by Karl Mannheim, that called for a more hermeneutic or humanistic sociology. Thus anti-radical modernist thought can also be described as an interdisciplinary approach to cultural analysis.

The anti-radical modernists described in this dissertation are admittedly a small limited group that was often out of touch with some of the major currents in American life, especially those currents associated with religion. Furthermore, their influence rapidly declined during the 1960s as American radicalism reasserted itself. Yet during the period immediately after the Second World War these intellectuals exerted considerable and disproportionate influence. Located in New York City, they found themselves working in a city that was enjoying at that moment a period of cultural influence that it had not have before the war. Its power would in time diminish as other American cities --especially those in the West and the South -- grew and became more cosmopolitan. Also, their work coincided with a tremendous growth in American higher education. As young men and women entered college in record numbers, they studied literature and history in ways that were very much influenced by the discourse of these leading thinkers. Thus due to circumstances that in many ways were accidental, the anti-radical modernist discourse had a profound affect on American culture, especially among Americans who were educated and considered themselves liberal. Indeed, anti-radical modernism was a key component to Cold War liberalism.

## CHAPTER ONE

### **The Sins of Middlebrow**

The origin of much of the anti-radical liberalism that characterized the immediate postwar era is found in the anti-Stalinist left of the 1930s. The journal, *Partisan Review*, was main outlet of the anti-Stalinist left for expressing its opposition to both mainstream liberalism and Stalinist-dominated radicalism. The conflict was ostensibly political and ideological. For most of the *Partisan Review* circle, mainstream liberalism, or progressivism, was intellectually flaccid and too prone to overlook the threat of totalitarianism. As for the American Communist Party, the actions of Stalin over the past decade had convinced most of the *Partisan* circle that there was no real difference between the government of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. Both countries, in their view, were totalitarian dictatorships based on a sick cult of personality. The Popular Front contrivances, the Moscow show trials, the rumors of concentration camps in the Soviet Union, disturbing reports about communist activity during the Spanish Civil War, the ill-treatment and eventual assassination of Trotsky, and, at the end of the decade, the Soviet-German non-aggression pact, turned the *Partisan Review* circle into entrenched anticommunists.

Yet despite the fact that their conflict was primarily ideological and political, the intellectuals associated with the *Review* expressed themselves and described their conflict with the communists in primarily cultural terms. Indeed, when Rahv and Philip reorganized the *Partisan Review* as an anti-Stalinist organ, they announced their

intentions in an essay that denounced the Communist Party's doctrinaire stance on what was acceptable literature. The party encouraged literature that was socially realistic and depicted the plight of the worker and the revolutionary. It was didactic and polemic. Rahv and Philips argued it was also artistically dull and unsophisticated. Rahv had a year earlier defied radical sensibilities when he expressed admiration for T.S. Eliot's play, *Murder in the Cathedral*, even though it expressed conservative Anglo-Catholic themes. Eliot may have fascist ideas, Rahv admitted, but this play nevertheless transcended its author's ideology. Similarly, Philips and Rahv later argued that art could not be constrained by ideological demands and strictures, if it was going to express the complexities of life. In short, the social realism demanded by orthodox party members was considered by the *Partisan* circle creatively constraining and politically unrealistic, perhaps even naïve.<sup>1</sup>

Rahv and Philips quickly gathered around their new reborn journal a group of intellectuals who viewed the political conflict on the left in cultural terms. *Partisan Review* became the proponent and outlet for modernist art and literature, as well as anti-Stalinist political sentiment. The journal was still very much dominated by a radical alienation from American society, but this dissatisfaction with American culture, politics, and the capitalist system was combined with a fierce anti-Stalinism. By the end of the 1930s, the term "middlebrow" was frequently used by the *Partisan* intellectuals to describe everything that they found culturally repellent. Party agitprop, commercial mass culture, academic scholasticism, the remnants of the Victorian Genteel tradition, the glossy magazines such as *Time* and *Life*, and popular novels, were all classified as "middlebrow." To be "middlebrow," in the lexicon of the anti-Stalinist radicals, was to

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<sup>1</sup> Cooney, *The Rise of the New York Intellectuals*, 87-94.

be vulgar, naïve, and totalitarian all at once. Indeed, according to the *Partisan Review* intellectuals, there was no worse sin.

The term middlebrow did not have a pejorative connotation when it first appeared during the early twentieth century. An early employment of the concept of the middlebrow in a positive sense is found in Van Wyck Brooks's 1915 essay, "Highbrow and Lowbrow." Brooks described American culture as being profoundly divided between the "highbrow" and the "lowbrow." The "highbrow," according to Brooks, was a combination of the ideas and abstract theories of the university, the idealism of the main-line Protestant clergy, and the culture of American intellectuals.<sup>2</sup> It was, in short, what Morton White would call, some thirty years later, the "formalism" that characterized much of the thought of the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, "lowbrow" was understood by Brooks to be the characteristic outlook of American business, especially its tendency to be supremely practical without any trace of idealism, and certainly without any sense of compassion. He believed that it was necessary to integrate these two narrow cultures to form a broader culture that was more suitable to the demands of a modern world and encouraged a "personal approach" to society. Brooks was convinced that Americans could create this new culture on a "middle plane of existence" where the idealism of the highbrow could easily mix with the "self-interested" practicality of the lowbrow and thereby alleviate the worse tendencies of an isolated highbrow or lowbrow culture.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Van Wyck Brooks, "Highbrow and Lowbrow," in Van Wyck Brooks, *America's Coming-of-Age*, (Garden City, New York, 1958), 1-19.

<sup>3</sup> Morton G. White, "The Revolt Against Formalism in American Social Thought," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 8 (April, 1947): 131-152.

<sup>4</sup> Brooks, *America's Coming-of-Age*, 18.

Three years later, Brooks connected his concept of a “middle plane,” or the “personal approach to society,” with American literary sensibilities and historical memory when he called for the creation of a “useable past.”<sup>5</sup> Instead of characterizing American literature as a seamless representation of American culture that “reaffirms the values established by the commercial tradition,” Brooks argued that the struggle of the individual American artist against the dominant commercial values and censorship, what Brooks called the “ordeal” of the artist -- had to be discovered and appreciated by the reading public. He thought that if the “ordeal” of the artist could be understood -- if Americans could be made to realize that throughout their history a valiant and creative few have struggled against the commercial values that dominated the national culture -- then “the creative forces” of the country might “lose a little of the hectic individualism that keeps them from uniting against their common enemies.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, literature could be used to advance the goals of American progressivism by illustrating an alternative value system that emphasized the collective over traditional American individualism.

By the early thirties, the term middlebrow was generally used in a less politically charged way.<sup>7</sup> More often than not, it simply referred to the more accessible works of literature that were popular with the larger reading public, as opposed to the rather difficult modernist works which were critically praised but not often read. When Margaret Widdermer used the term middlebrow in 1933, she simply meant the popular

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<sup>5</sup> Van Wyck Brooks, "On Creating a Usable Past," *The Dial* 64 (April 11, 1918): 337-342.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 342.

<sup>7</sup> For the evolution of the term “middlebrow,” especially in the sense of simply being accessible culture, see Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*, (Chapel Hill, 1992). Rubin’s introduction describes Brooks’s political understanding, as well as Widdermer’s more mundane appreciation of middlebrow’s accessibility.

novel, the kind of book that would appeal to “the reading public,” or what she described as that group of “men and women, fairly civilized, fairly literate, who supported the critics and lecturers and publishers by purchasing their wares.”<sup>8</sup> If Widdemer’s use of the term suggested a mild anti-intellectualism associated with the middlebrow, her preference for American popular authors also indicated the growing cultural nationalism of the thirties. Throughout the inter-war period, Van Wyck Brooks continued to urge American writers to create a “useable past,” and what one might call a didactic literature. By the thirties, his rhetoric had become more strident and explicitly nationalistic. During the first two decades of the century, Brooks was in tune with the progressive political and artistic vanguard. His call for a culture founded in on a middle plane echoed contemporary criticism of the stagnant “genteel” culture and the doctrinaire (or formalistic) worldview of the late Victorian age. In the years after the First World War, however, Brooks found himself increasingly estranged from the intellectual avant-garde. The old culture had been effectively repudiated, but it seemed to Brooks that what replaced it was an intelligentsia composed of cynical and pessimistic artists and writers, who saw nothing in American culture or history that was remotely useful to the modern age. Moreover, the new avant-garde appeared to misunderstand his concept of the ordeal of the artist. While the modern avant-garde certainly was opposed to the dominant commercial culture of the day, Brooks thought that they were too individualistic in their opposition, celebrating artistic subjectivity and individual non-conformism while ignoring his call for a more collectivist minded culture.

Brooks responded to the emerging modernist avant-garde by creating his own version of a “useable” past for Americans. In a series of books, the most notable being

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<sup>8</sup> Margaret Widdemer, "Message and Middlebrow," *The Saturday Review* 9 (February 18, 1933): 433-434.

*The Flowering of New England* (1936), Brooks rehabilitated American culture and created a narrative that depicted a period in which American culture was active and creative, and at the same time more socially integrated than contemporary industrial culture. Antebellum Boston was according to Brooks a “culture city” and the New England countryside nourished its creativity. As time passed, unfortunately, the “culture city” of Boston gave way to the “world-city” of New York, a city that was dominated by the fragmented commercial culture of the industrial age, as opposed to New England’s unified contemplative spirit.<sup>9</sup>

Brooks’s conception of a cultural golden age that existed sometime in the country’s pre-industrial past, before the cosmopolitan “deracination” of the Gilded Age, put Brooks at odds with the modernist sensibility of the inter-war period.<sup>10</sup> F.W. Dupee (a founding editor of *Partisan Review*) observed in 1939 that Brooks had become an “anti-modernist” and had adopted Spengler’s dichotomy between “culture” and “civilization,” with Brooks appearing to take the side of culture over civilization – or, at the least, it seemed that Brooks preferred an “organic” and national culture over a “cosmopolitan” culture.<sup>11</sup> For all of Dupee’s strident denunciation of fascism, it appeared to him that Brooks had nothing to offer the modern radical, and that his conception of culture dangerously flirted with popular quasi-fascistic concepts. “Translated into current politics,” Dupee wrote, “the nostalgia of ‘Flowering’ turns out to resemble the speeches at a Chamber of Commerce luncheon – a combination of gala rhetoric and inscrutable reasoning.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Van Wyck Brooks, *The Flowering of New England, 1815-1865*, rev. ed., ([New York], 1940), 526-537.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 527.

<sup>11</sup> F. W. Dupee, “The Americanism of Van Wyck Brooks,” *Partisan Review* 6 (Summer, 1939): 69-85.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

Thus by the mid-1930s, intellectuals who considered themselves politically and artistically to be supporters or members of the avant-garde increasingly regarded the term “middlebrow” as a designation for the worse kind of pedantic and uninspiring bourgeois culture. At the same time, anti-Stalinist intellectuals, especially Dwight Macdonald and Clement Greenberg, began to use the concept of the middlebrow to identify and explain the official aesthetic position of the Soviet government and the American Communist party.<sup>13</sup> The dispute between the Trotskyite and the Stalinist wings of the left that led to the formation of *Partisan Review* was as much about aesthetic sensibilities as it was about politics. Indeed, the two were intimately connected. The intellectuals associated with the anti-Stalinists and the *Partisan Review* were firmly committed to artistic modernism in the literary and visual arts, and understood the Stalinist rejection of much of the modernist movement during the mid-thirties as a symptom of what they considered the counter-revolutionary regime of Stalin. Confirming their view of Stalinism and its relationship to the arts was no less an authority than Trotsky himself. In the pages of *Partisan Review* the exiled revolutionary described the “art of the Stalinist period” as the “frankest expression of the profound decline of the proletarian revolution.”<sup>14</sup>

However, anti-Stalinist intellectuals and the *Partisan Review* crowd did not need Trotsky to confirm what they already believed. In a series of articles about Soviet cinema begun before Trotsky’s article appeared, Dwight Macdonald reported how Stalin’s government destroyed what was during the early twenties the most artistically advanced

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<sup>13</sup> For the pejorative use of the term middlebrow to describe the “official” revolutionary aesthetic, see Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years*, 336-339; Bloom, *Prodigal Sons: The New York Intellectuals and Their World*, 90-93, 116-120.

<sup>14</sup> Leon Trotsky, “Art and Politics,” *Partisan Review* 5 (August-September, 1938): 2-10.

film industry in the world.<sup>15</sup> Macdonald identified the forced imposition during the early thirties of “socialist realism” as the official aesthetic theory of the Soviet Union as the means by which Stalin exercised total control over Soviet art. The theory asserted -- in the words of the official government cultural journal, *Literaturny Kritik* -- that “art worthy of the name serves life and helps human beings who are constructing life to understand more clearly its ends, its possibilities its vices.”<sup>16</sup> Therefore, according to Soviet practice, art had to serve a didactic purpose, one that was always aimed at furthering the revolution. In practice, Macdonald noted, this meant that the Stalin’s personal taste and political needs became the measure by which art in the Soviet Union was judged. And this standard was, according to Macdonald, unbearably vulgar and pedestrian. “Socialist realism has, of course,” he explained, “its dialectical antithesis -- Satanic, compounded of all evil – in the shape of ‘formalism,’ or sometimes, more frankly, ‘leftism.’”

Roughly speaking, ‘formalism,’ is what is known in more civilized societies as ‘experimental’ or even simply ‘modern’ art. The amount of energy and newsprint Soviet journalists have wasted in medieval debates as to what is and what is not ‘formalistic,’ is appalling. Stalin, who leaves theoretical hairsplitting to his underlings, bluntly cut to the heart of the matter when he admonished Shostakovich to abandon his discordant modern technique in favor of melodies the toiling masses could whistle on their way to work. In a totalitarian state, art functions as an opiate, not a stimulant – or irritant. Leftism in art and leftism in politics are uncomfortably close relations. Socialist realism is the doctrine of a reactionary ruling class which must at all costs keep its artists and their mass audience safely under control.<sup>17</sup>

Like Stakhanovism (which was a propaganda program that promoted industrial productivity to justify the growth of the state bureaucracy) and the Popular Front,

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<sup>15</sup> Dwight Macdonald, "The Soviet Cinema: 1930-1938, Part II," *Partisan Review* 5 (August-September, 1938): 35-62; Dwight Macdonald, "Soviet Society and Its Cinema," *Partisan Review* 6 (Winter, 1939): 80-95.

<sup>16</sup> Macdonald, "The Soviet Cinema: 1930-1938, Part II," 36.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

socialist realism, Macdonald argued, was another manifestation of the growing cult of personality that was being built around Stalin. Macdonald understood this cult as a perverse kind of individualism. There was, he noted, a “transition from collectivism to individualism taking place in the Soviet Union. The individual, not the masses, say the socialist realists, is the proper theme for Soviet art.” And Macdonald made it clear that the individual they had in mind was always “the Great Leader.”<sup>18</sup>

Macdonald took care to emphasize the Stalin in Stalinism. He did not want his readers to forget the particular role that Stalin had in perverting the revolution, and he did not want his condemnation of Stalinism to be used against other forms of socialism. Macdonald was still committed – and would remain committed throughout his life – to the idea of a socialist revolution. In his mind Stalin was another reactionary – no different than any fascist dictator. “By its very nature,” Macdonald explained, “the Stalin regime must pursue a reactionary policy in art. Unable to conceive of such matters except on the lowest, most vulgar plane, it ‘integrates’ art with the state by the bluntest sort of police measures.”<sup>19</sup>

For Macdonald, there was nothing intrinsically wrong with the state being integrated with art, or even with the use of art for propaganda purposes. He conceived of the avant-garde as an artistic vanguard that used art to challenge the values and assumptions of bourgeois society. And Macdonald hoped that this artistic challenge would help encourage the creation of a politically and socially more integrated and just society. What he objected to was the authoritarian and centralized approach of Stalinism. Macdonald envisioned a multinational or cosmopolitan avant-garde that was guided by

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.: 36-37.

<sup>19</sup> Macdonald, "Soviet Society and Its Cinema," 83.

socialist principles, but directed and controlled by individual artists. This was, of course, incompatible with Stalin's need to control every aspect of Soviet life. Thus, Macdonald concluded, the "Stalin School" of Soviet cinema (and art in general) was "designed to reinforce, not combat, those characteristics of backwards cultures: provincial smugness, the ignorant acceptance of inferior, banal art forms as 'healthy' and 'normal,' and a corresponding suspicion of more advanced forms."<sup>20</sup> It was simply another especially pernicious form of the middlebrow.

Clement Greenberg connected Macdonald's observations on Soviet culture to the negative cultural trends in rest of the world when he borrowed the German word "kitsch" to describe an international phenomenon that was simultaneously destroying traditional culture and inhibiting the avant-garde.<sup>21</sup> Kitsch, according to Greenberg, was the cultural product of industrialization – a manufactured culture designed to appeal to the masses. It was not a mode of expression invented by a particular leader, or government, or even ruling-class. Instead, Greenberg noted, kitsch was the inevitable result of the urbanization and the so-called universal literacy produced by the industrial revolution. The new urban masses, liberated from agricultural drudgery but cut-off from their folk culture, demanded entertainment, and capitalistic entrepreneurs quickly satisfied their demands. Kitsch is not simply the lowbrow, though. Greenberg understood that kitsch had a voracious appetite for cultural material, and it drew from all sources – including folk traditions, the "genuine highbrow," and even the avant-garde. Greenberg did not use the term middlebrow in his essay, but it is clear that he understood kitsch as the ultimate manifestation of the middlebrow – that is, as a plane of existence in which all culture is

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>21</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review* 6 (Fall, 1939): 34-49.

processed for mass consumption. Kitsch is therefore simultaneously utilitarian, vulgar and pedantic. It cultivates a modern “insensibility,” which reduces qualitative differences to mere opinion and encourages the most accessible form of literalism. It is nothing less, Greenberg asserted, than an “ersatz culture” that demands nothing from its “customers except their money.”<sup>22</sup>

Like Macdonald, Greenberg saw the state-supported culture of the Soviet Union as one of the most egregious examples of kitsch. And he agreed with Macdonald when he described the way in which Stalin used kitsch to displace traditional culture and insulate the average Soviet citizen from a culture that might require reflective and critical thought. But Greenberg did not completely follow Macdonald’s cultural schema. Unlike Macdonald, who believed that the avant-garde criticism of bourgeois culture would eventually lead to a socialist revolution, Greenberg recognized that the more prevalent trend of the avant-garde was to withdraw from politics. The avant-garde, at least in its modernist guise, was more concerned with just keeping “culture moving,” rather than directing this movement toward a particular ideological goal. Greenberg realized that the contemporary avant-garde was concerned with a self-referential concentration on the techniques and the means of art rather than the subject matter of art. The slogan, “art for art’s sake,” became the rallying cry of the inter-war modernists, and art that was too explicit in its social or political references was looked down upon as middlebrow.<sup>23</sup>

Greenberg did not believe that the avant-garde’s avoidance of content was something that called for either approval or disapproval. While there may have been the kind of decadence one sees in a declining civilization in the “the imitating of imitating”

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 37.

by the modern avant-garde, Greenberg insisted that it was nevertheless still a growing culture that was capable of artistic innovation. But although he celebrated the artistic innovation as well as aesthetic originality and excellence of the avant-garde, Greenberg also recognized that it was not intrinsically committed to political left. He pointed out that despite the philistinism of Hitler and Stalin, there were several avant-garde artists who embraced these regimes. More significantly, Greenberg noted, Mussolini for a time made modernism the official aesthetic of his government. The Italian dictator eventually turned to kitsch, like Hitler and Stalin, because of kitsch's inherent appeal to the masses. The fact that the population so readily and willingly consumes kitsch made it indispensable for the totalitarian regime. Yet while the totalitarian governments found kitsch an essential tool in manipulating the masses, the pure profit-seeking of Western – especially American – producers of kitsch created a product that was so irresistible, and so perfectly displaced any cultural competition, that the totalitarian governments had to strictly regulate the access that their populations had to it, or else it would overwhelm the native state version of kitsch.<sup>24</sup>

Greenberg was still a committed socialist when he wrote the article. However, he reversed the usual radical understanding of the relationship between the avant-garde and socialism. He knew that the avant-garde was not going to further the cause of socialism, but Greenberg believed that socialism could save the avant-garde by somehow – he never explained exactly how – controlling the proliferation of kitsch.<sup>25</sup> For Greenberg, socialism was a means to an end, and that end was ultimately based on aesthetic – not social – values. Ironically, Greenberg thought that economic egalitarianism, or socialism,

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 49.

could make his ideal of aesthetic elitism sustainable in a modern world with a mass-produced culture. This paradoxical elitism -- that is, the belief that a difficult and demanding culture that realistically was accessible to only a few, could be, and ought to be, maintained by a society based on democratic values -- was a theme that after the war would be transferred to the anti-radical modernists. However, the more obvious and immediate effect of Greenberg's article on kitsch was that it firmly established a connection between the banal mass-produced and middlebrow culture of the United States and the rather more sinister state-controlled popular culture of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. According to Greenberg -- and a major portion of the anti-Stalinist left -- there was no qualitative difference between Hitler's condemnation of "degenerate art," Stalin's demand for "socialist realism," and American middlebrow publications such as *Readers Digest* or the *Saturday Evening Post*, or even less esteemed cultural products such as comic books and pulp magazines. They were all had an equally corrosive effect on the avant-garde.

Greenberg's essay, "Avant-garde and Kitsch," played a decisive role in shaping not only the aesthetic sensibility of the New York intellectuals, but also their political sensibilities. Since the mid-1930s, *Partisan Review* had been had been waging a campaign against the Stalinist left for the sake of an independent socialism. At the same time, the journal ceaselessly promoted a modernist aesthetic that placed creative and imaginative innovation above political considerations. There was always, though, a tension between *Partisan Review's* two different missions. Macdonald was convinced that the modernist avant-garde would create indirectly, that is, by criticizing the existing culture, a mentality conducive to revolutionary change. There was, of course, no

evidence that this would ever happen, and indeed the noticeably conservative stance of several leading modernist writers suggested otherwise. Greenberg ended the contradiction by frankly admitting that aesthetics were more important than politics. Although Greenberg was still committed to socialism, he saw this socialism as a way to create a society in which the modernist aesthetic sensibility could be encouraged and protected. Social justice, progress, the fulfillment of imperatives of history, were all relegated by Greenberg to secondary concerns compared with the need for an art that reflected the unique truths of modernity.

Greenberg also neatly tied all of the *bêtes noire* of the *Partisan Review* circle into one overarching critique that was characterized by an argument against terrible taste. This was not a trivial matter since taste was, from the perspective of Greenberg and other New York intellectuals, directly tied to one's political ideology. More precisely, it was tied to a person's desire to impose his or her ideology upon others. This was not an unreasonable understanding of taste. After all, the totalitarian governments had made it clear that they regarded the imposition of a state-approved aesthetic an essential part of their program to achieve uniformity and control of their national cultures. Furthermore, it was clear that many intellectuals in the West considered the modernist aesthetic to be decadent and believed that it undermined the ability of the West to defend itself against totalitarian aggression. In 1940 Archibald MacLeish – who was the Librarian of Congress, an official government position that in the minds of many of *Partisan Review* intellectuals was the equivalent of being the “minister of culture” -- wrote an invective against the “irresponsibles.” The “irresponsibles” were those intellectuals who MacLeish considered as having contributed to the moral-relativism of the inter-war period and

continued, in his view, to view the democracies and the totalitarian governments with a degree of moral-equivalency. This was only the most prominent example of the desire of many established intellectuals to dictate taste in the name of democracy and national security.<sup>26</sup>

In September 1941 Van Wyck Brooks seemed to confirm the worse fears of many New York intellectuals when he gave a lecture at Columbia University on “Primary and Coterie Literature.” Brooks divided writers into two groups. One was the “primary” writers, who, according to Brooks, emphasized the positive aspects of Western civilization by writing about “great themes,” such as courage, justice, and love. Certainly all of the classic writers of the West -- such as Milton and Shakespeare -- were included in this group, as were many of the writers of the nineteenth century, such as Dickens, Hugo and Emerson. The other group was the “secondary” or “coterie” writers, whose work may be aesthetically interesting and even important, but nevertheless were not widely read by the general public. Furthermore, Brooks disapprovingly noted that these “secondary” works generally dwelled on the negative aspects of life. Brooks included in this group virtually all of the modernist writers of the last sixty years, including, Nietzsche, T.S. Eliot, Joyce, and even Hemingway.<sup>27</sup>

Dwight Macdonald was exasperated by Brooks’s address and immediately linked it with MacLeish’s essay, “The Irresponsibles.” He also linked Brooks’s address and MacLeish’s essay to the recent trend of formerly leftist intellectuals – Macdonald names Sidney Hook, Max Eastman, James Burnham, John Dos Passos, and others – of abandoning their pacifist and revolutionary stance and supporting the war and the

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<sup>26</sup> Archibald MacLeish, *The Irresponsibles: A Declaration*, (New York, 1940).

<sup>27</sup> Dwight Macdonald, "Kulturbolschewismus is Here," *Partisan Review* 8 (November-December, 1941): 442-451.

capitalist order for the sake of the anti-fascist crusade.<sup>28</sup> For Macdonald, who was a Trotskyite and a pacifist and had become increasingly concerned with what he understood as the deliberate drift toward war (and an alliance with the Soviet Union) by the United States government, these developments represented nothing less than the emergence of a bourgeois American version of Stalinist culture, which Macdonald sarcastically called “Kulturbolschewismus.”

Macdonald defended modernist literature and, as Brooks put it, its “negative” perspective. This perspective, declared Macdonald, was merely an accurate reflection of the times in which the modern writer lived. Western civilization was indeed in peril and its bourgeois dominated culture was collapsing. It appeared to Macdonald that Brooks just wanted to deny this obvious truth and pretend that “mankind is moving forward.” Brooks blamed the messenger –the modernist writer -- instead of dealing directly with the profound problems facing modern society. But Macdonald believed that Brooks was expressing something more than just philistinism and wishful thinking. “The final turn of the screw,” declared Macdonald, “is that Brooks, like MacLeish, in attacking those whose work exposes this decomposition [of modern society], himself expresses its furthest totalitarian reach.”<sup>29</sup> It was not a mere coincidence that Brooks’s critique of the “coterie” writers echoed the Stalinist attack against the “formalism” of the avant-garde. According to Macdonald, the connection between these critiques of modernism was much more sinister. “Here we have that *official* approach to culture,” wrote Macdonald,

which has spread far beyond the confines of the Stalinist movement. Brooks’ thesis is essentially an amplification of the attack on the “irresponsibles” made a year ago by Archibald MacLeish, Librarian of Congress, and intimate of the White House. And would not Goebbels, the foe of “degenerate” modern art,

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 442-443.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 446.

applaud not only the particular cultural tendency attacked but also the very terms of the argument: “Primary literature somehow follows the biological grain; it favors what psychologists call the ‘life-drive’; it is a force of regeneration that in some way conduces to race survival.” “Kulturbolschewismus” “formalism”, “coterie writing”, “irresponsibles” –terms differ for strategic reasons, but the content – and The Enemy –is the same.<sup>30</sup>

Macdonald echoed Greenberg – indeed he went further than Greenberg—in tying together all the enemies of the *Partisan Review* circle in one neat package. Middleclass philistines, reactionary politicians, fascist overlords, and Bolshevik commissars, were described by Macdonald as manifestations of one single phenomenon and could be identified by as single trait – their desire to impose upon intellectuals their middlebrow tastes.

Most of the readers of *Partisan Review* agreed with Macdonald’s opinion of Brooks. The magazine asked twenty writers to comment on Van Wyck Brooks and Macdonald’s essay, and just about all of them agreed with Macdonald.<sup>31</sup> Henry Miller gave perhaps the most amusing, if not necessarily the most incisive response, when he wrote, “My impression was that Van Wyck Brooks was dead – years ago. I see now he’s deader than dead. It’s too damn silly to bother about. These people kill themselves off. As for MacLeish, I never read a line of his –that’s significant too.”<sup>32</sup> Lionel Trilling, on a more thoughtful note, condemned Brooks, not for his critique of the so-called “coterie-writers,” but for his failure to understand the “primary” writers. It appeared to Trilling that Brooks ignored that all the great writers he named as “primary” also depicted the “negative” in their work. In fact, Trilling insisted, all great literature depicts the negative and the positive aspects of life as a complicated mix, without any absolute representatives

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 450.

<sup>31</sup> Allen Tate et al., "On the 'Brooks-MacLeish Thesis'," *Partisan Review* 9 (January-February, 1942): 38-47.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 41.

of either. "Literature, I suppose, has not recovered from the decay of religion," concluded Trilling. "For it is certainly clear that what Mr. Brooks wants is religion and not literature at all."<sup>33</sup>

Macdonald's essay on the rising "Kulturbolschewismus" in the country was one of the last pieces he wrote for the *Partisan Review* that did not arouse widespread acrimony and conflict among the New York intellectuals, especially the editorial board of the *Partisan Review*. In the same issue that the modernist writers and critics expressed their support of Macdonald, there appeared a brief "Statement by the Editors" that declared that the journal would not take an official position on America's entrance in the war – this was the first issue published after Pearl Harbor – because the editors could not agree to a single position. "Our main task now," the editors reassured their readers, "is to preserve cultural values against all types of pressure and coercion."<sup>34</sup> The fact was that "cultural values," or aesthetic standards of taste, were about all the editors could agree on. Macdonald maintained his Trotskyite position on the war. William Phillips and Philip Rahv had reversed their position on the war before Pearl Harbor and supported American involvement as inevitable and necessary.<sup>35</sup> By the summer of 1943, Macdonald was forced to leave *Partisan Review* and start another journal, *politics*, in which he could more fully express his pacifist position.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>34</sup> Clement Greenberg et al., "A Statement by the Editors," *Partisan Review* 9 (January-February, 1942): 2.

<sup>35</sup> Philip Rahv, "10 Propositions and 8 Errors," *Partisan Review* 8 (November-December, 1941): 499-506. This essay challenged the pacifist position of Macdonald. Note the date; its timing could not have been more fortuitous. For Macdonald's position, see Clement Greenberg and Dwight Macdonald, "10 Propositions on the War," *Partisan Review* 8 (July-August, 1941): 271-278. After Pearl Harbor, Greenberg abandoned his pacifist position and joined the U.S. Army Air Force. Macdonald remained a committed pacifist throughout the war and devoted his journal *Politics* to criticism of the war effort.

<sup>36</sup> Cooney, *The Rise of the New York Intellectuals*, 206-209.

Despite the acrimony caused by this split, the Macdonald-Greenberg conceptualization of the middlebrow survived the war. Middlebrow remained simultaneously a label for the worse aspects of mass culture and the Stalinist control of art and culture. As the Cold War developed, this conflation continued to an extraordinary degree. And it was Greenberg who led the way. Continuing the line of argument that first appeared in his article, "Avant-garde and Kitsch," he reiterated his assertion that the "message of modern art is precisely that means are content." However, in 1948 Greenberg had come to believe that despite the American propensity for middlebrow kitsch, the country had created the most dynamic, most avant-garde manifestation of culture – Abstract Expressionism. As the art critic of *Partisan Review*, Greenberg spent the years immediately after the war promoting American abstract art and reminding readers of the threat that kitsch and Stalinism posed to culture.

The critics of abstract art accused it of being bereft of 'human' content, and of having no relevance to life. Of course, Greenberg denounced these critics as middlebrow philistines, who simply did not understand painting or sculpture. But he did not stop at dismissing his opponents as middle-class connoisseurs with pedestrian tastes. Continuing the conflation of the middlebrow with Stalinist cultural controls, Greenberg linked his critics with official Soviet policy.<sup>37</sup> He noted, in one *Partisan Review* article, that an essay by the English critic, Geoffrey Grigson, sounded like the criticism of abstract art found in the official Soviet press. "Mr. Grigson's call for 'viable ends' and common, universal humanity in contemporary painting and sculpture," Greenberg observed, "is echoed in essence if not at all in style by a long article called 'Aspects of two Cultures'

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<sup>37</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Art Chronicle: Irrelevance versus Irresponsibility," *Partisan Review* 15 (May, 1948): 573-579.

appearing in Number 52 of the *VOKS Bulletin*, a cultural magazine published in Moscow in English by the USSR Society for Cultural Revelations with Foreign Countries.” The author of the Soviet article, Vladimir Kemenov, reiterated the Stalinist position that abstract art was a reflection of “decadent” bourgeois culture. It was a position that was reminiscent of the suppression of modern art by the Nazis. “Mr. Kemenov,” Greenberg explained, “goes on to say that modern art is pathological, insane, mystical, irrational, escapist, etc. But it is to be noted that throughout the article he, or at least, his translator, avoids the term ‘degenerate art,’ perhaps because the Nazis used to apply it so regularly to modern art.”<sup>38</sup>

While Greenberg’s assertion that Western and Soviet middlebrow critics of the avant-garde shared a totalitarian outlook on culture was a continuation of his pre-war conceptualization of kitsch, his understanding of the avant-garde had by 1948 undergone a subtle change. In 1939, Greenberg linked the avant-garde with the rise of a socialist society. It is true that unlike some leftist critics such as Macdonald, Greenberg had by 1939 already abandoned the premise that the avant-garde could play a decisive role in this transformation. But he still believed that a revolutionary change was necessary if genuine culture – which was only expressed by the avant-garde – was to survive.

After the war, however, Greenberg began to suggest that art and politics were unrelated or at least ought to be unrelated, and that the avant-garde ought to avoid politics entirely. For Greenberg, the reason for the disassociation of art and politics had to do with the unique position in which humanity finds itself in the modern age. “Human activity,” he explained, “embodies its own ends and no longer makes them transcendental

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 577-578.

by postponing them to an afterlife or old age.”<sup>39</sup> Thus abstract art’s focus of the means of creation and on the creative act itself was especially suited to an age in which teleology was no longer viable and human beings had to learn to focus on the moment rather than making unacceptable sacrifices for an imagined perfect future. The idea of the avant-garde as a revolutionary force was for Greenberg nothing but a quaint concept from the 1930s.

This is not to say that Greenberg had become reconciled to popular culture. He still believed that the mainstream culture produced by a capitalist society was kitsch, and that kitsch was corrosive to genuine culture. In a *Partisan Review* symposium on the “State of American Writing,” Greenberg reiterated his contempt for the middlebrow. “Middlebrow culture,” he declared, “attacks distinctions as such and insinuates itself everywhere, devaluating the precious, infecting the healthy, corrupting the honest, and stultifying the wise.” While Greenberg no longer believed in the revolutionary potential of the avant-garde and did not think that the avant-garde writer or artist ought to be explicitly anti-Stalinist in his or her “aesthetic expression,” he was convinced that sophisticated work had to be promoted in order to counter the effects of the middlebrow and encourage a nuanced appreciation of life.<sup>40</sup>

After the war, Greenberg’s criticism took on an anti-radical tone. As he abandoned the idea of a revolutionary avant-garde, Greenberg’s conception of a genuine art, or an avant-garde art, as opposed to kitsch, began to take on the characteristics of simply a highbrow culture – that is, a more difficult, sophisticated culture that required education and a cultivation of taste. Stalinism and middlebrow culture -- with their

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 577.

<sup>40</sup> Clement Greenberg, “The State of American Writing, 1948: A Symposium,” *Partisan Review* 15 (August, 1948): 876-879.

sentimental and simplistic depictions of society, of history, and life itself – were just two manifestations of the same phenomenon that was reducing the quality of thought. It was a view that was reiterated by Lionel Trilling in the same symposium.<sup>41</sup> After describing how the middlebrow was overwhelming all other forms of culture, Trilling expressed his dismay over the fact that so many intellectuals seemed to be turning toward a new philistinism that rejected the cultural achievements of the past. “Certain philistines,” he explained, “have undertaken to speak for this cultural group and to attack highbrow culture as pretentious or irresponsible or corrupt or in insane.” And Trilling added,

it is also possible to call it Stalinism, for Stalinism becomes endemic in the American middle class as soon as that class begins to think; it is a cultural Stalinism, independent of any political belief: the cultural ideas of the ADA [a liberal anticommunist organization] will not, I venture to say, be found materially different from those of the PAC [a pro-Soviet organization]; Parrington is the essential arbiter of the literary views of our more-or-less intellectual middle class, Parrington who so well plows the ground for the negation of literature.

Thus by 1948, in the minds of most New York intellectuals and certainly those who were associated with *Partisan Review*, the “middlebrow” was a catch-all term used to describe numerous sins: Stalinism, American provincialism, mass-produced culture, political propaganda, advertisement, academic didacticism, liberal optimism, and progressive pessimism. This is not simply a case of political ideology being projected into aesthetic areas of culture. The conflation between the political or ideological and the aesthetic aspects of culture was two-way. The anti-radical modernists used aesthetic values to evaluate political ideology just as much as they used political ideology to evaluate literature and art. Furthermore, the political ideology and the aesthetic values of the New York intellectuals, in particular, were often intellectual manifestations of their deeper social insecurities, especially when it came to the issue of “provincialism” and any

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<sup>41</sup> Lionel Trilling, “The State of American Writing, 1948,” *Partisan Review* 15 (August, 1948): 886-893.

suggestion of control or authority over intellectuals based on a concept of social or political “obligations.”

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Lionel Trilling: “Elements That Are Wanted”**

Perhaps more than any other single intellectual to emerge from the New York anti-Stalinist left, Lionel Trilling pushed the anti-Stalinist and modernist discourse associated with the *Partisan Review* circle in an explicitly anti-radical direction. In the early 1940s Trilling expressed in a series of essays, most of which were published in the *Partisan Review*, a political and aesthetic sensibility that would provide for many intellectuals a foundational source for their post-war anti-radicalism. Trilling was one of the earliest New York intellectuals to reject not only Marxism in its Stalinist form, but also the entire political agenda of the radical left. There were other intellectuals who rejected the left, but Trilling’s approach was somewhat idiosyncratic. He did not become a typical mainstream liberal. Indeed, Trilling’s discourse is notable for the way it criticized liberalism as simply a less extreme form of Stalinism. Both, according to Trilling, lacked what he called a sense of “moral realism,” or an understanding of the limits that human personality imposed upon any social or political system.

Yet Trilling never identified himself as a conservative. When he described, in the book that would give him his first national exposure, *The Liberal Imagination* (1950), that the contemporary “conservative impulse” was expressed “only in action or in irritable mental gestures which seek to resemble ideas,” he was sincerely conveying his belief that as a coherent system of ideas conservatism was a spent force that could not

effectively respond to the crisis of modernity.<sup>1</sup> While he would repeat in many essays the idea that liberals ought to take seriously the conservative critique of modern society, he resisted the temptation to support a conservative tradition as a viable basis on which to build a modern society. Ironically, if Trilling could be said to have supported any tradition, it was the liberal tradition, that is, the values, ideas, and, more importantly, the political sensibility -- in a moral sense -- that were associated with the liberalism of the nineteenth-century Anglo-American middleclass. Trilling was especially enamored by the thought of early and mid-Victorian intellectuals who he believed best combined the ideas of the Enlightenment and the Romantic eras. In this way Trilling was a true anti-radical who rejected the absolute solutions of the left and the right and instead defended what he understood as the core culture of modernity.

Lionel Trilling was born on July 4, 1905 in New York City. His father, David Trilling, was a furrier who had come to the United States from Poland at age 13. His mother, Fannie, was also Jewish, but her background differed from the usual Jewish-American experience. Her parents settled in London rather than New York, and Fannie lived there until she was sixteen, when she moved to the United States. Fannie may have come from Eastern European stock, but she always considered herself to be British. She instilled in Lionel a lifelong love of English culture and literature. Throughout his career as a literary critic and as a professor of English literature, Trilling displayed a distinct Anglophilia. He tended to be dismissive of American authors and to view the British

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<sup>1</sup> Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, vii.

authors of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as the proper core of the English literature canon.<sup>2</sup>

Trilling's family could be characterized as upper-middle class. He did not grow up on the Lower East Side or in another one of New York City's crowded early twentieth-century immigrant communities. While he certainly was raised in what can be described as a Jewish milieu, it was a milieu that had an assimilated culture that conformed to American middle-class norms and expectations. This middle-class upbringing distinguished Trilling from most of the other Jews associated with the New York intellectuals, who usually came from distinctly immigrant and working-class backgrounds. In contrast with many of these working-class Jews, such as Irving Howe and Sidney Hook, Trilling did not attend the City College of New York (CCNY) and instead went to Columbia University as an undergraduate.<sup>3</sup>

His undergraduate career has been described as undistinguished. Nevertheless, Trilling always credited John Erskine's undergraduate honors course as having helped shape many of his views on culture and education. The course reflected the New Humanist sensibility which stressed a broad liberal education based on the humanities,

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<sup>2</sup> For Trilling's early life and education, see Tanner, *Lionel Trilling*, 1-28; Trilling, *The Beginning of the Journey*, 1-40; Krupnick, *Lionel Trilling and the Fate of Cultural Criticism*, 19-50.

<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that Trilling was the only New York intellectual or Jew who attended Columbia University during the 1920s. While an undergraduate he was friendly with many Jewish students, for example Clifton Fadiman and Meyer Schapiro. For Trilling's experience at Columbia as an undergraduate and his social circle, see Diana Trilling, *The Beginning of the Journey*, 80-94. Sidney Hook, who went to CCNY as an undergraduate, studied philosophy as a graduate student at Columbia under John Dewey. But it appears he was not friendly with Trilling while Trilling was an undergraduate, and did not become close to the Trillings until 1931. Nevertheless, there were real class differences between intellectuals such as Hook and Howe, who came from a distinctive immigrant community, and Lionel Trilling. For an account their backgrounds and, more generally, the experience of poor Jewish immigrants, see Irving Howe, *A Margin of Hope: An Intellectual Autobiography*, 1st ed., (San Diego, 1982); Irving Howe, *The World of Our Fathers*, (New York, 1976); Sidney Hook, *Out of Step*, (New York, 1987).

the relationship of the humanities to society, and the role of aesthetics in civilization.<sup>4</sup> Trilling's later criticism would bear the mark of this influence, but somewhat uneasily. The New York intellectuals would later regard Erskine's humanist curriculum and the aesthetic approach of the New Humanists as retrograde and middlebrow. In his early years as a critic, Trilling was careful to be deferential enough to modernist literary sensibilities to avoid the charge of being a middlebrow, even though his conception of the relationship between aesthetics, morality, and society was remarkably similar to Erskine's.

Throughout the 1920s, Trilling's life could be described as typically upper middle-class. He was, however, very conscious of how being Jewish – which he would later describe as a “social fact” that could not be escaped – affected his life.<sup>5</sup> It was not an easy time to be an American Jew. During the 1920s many universities began to impose quotas on the number of Jews admitted and, in an era that saw the revival of the Ku Klux Klan and an anti-immigrant backlash that led to severe immigration restrictions, Trilling felt anti-Semitic pressures. As his wife, Diana Trilling, explained many years later, “American anti-Semitism in the twenties was neither virulent nor organized but it was widespread,” and being Jewish, especially for those who aspired to be a college professor or a similar professional associated with high culture, “was a sizable

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<sup>4</sup> Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*, (Chicago, 1987), 128-129,134. Graff classifies Erskine as a “Generalist,” who inspired the “Great Book” curriculum that later would be associated with Mortimer Adler, rather than a New Humanist. However, Graff does concede there was an uneasy alliance and convergence in subject matter between the New Humanists, such as Irving Babbitt at Harvard, and the Generalists such as Erskine.

<sup>5</sup> Tanner, *Lionel Trilling*, 16. Tanner quotes Trilling in a speech that Trilling gave in 1939 to the Jewish Student Society at Columbia: “The meaning of Jewishness lies largely with the action of non-Jews. It is not a racial fact; it is not a religious fact to any great extent, it is not a positive cultural fact. It is wholly a social fact.”

handicap.”<sup>6</sup> For a time Trilling responded to this pressure by more strongly asserting his identity. He worked for the *Menorah Journal*, a publication that explored Jewish cultural issues and was edited Eliot Cohen, the future editor of the official organ of the American Jewish Committee, *Commentary*. By 1931, Trilling left the magazine, and increasingly avoided addressing “Jewish” issues directly. Nevertheless, he still found himself identified as a distinctly Jewish intellectual. In 1936, the Columbia University English department tried to have him terminated, at least in part, because they regarded his approach to literature as too Jewish, as well as too Marxist and Freudian.<sup>7</sup>

Although Judaism would always be an important part of his identity – despite his ambivalent feelings toward his religion – the experience of anti-Semitism did not have as a dramatic effect on Trilling as the onset of the Depression. His father’s business collapsed after 1929, and Lionel was forced to support his family. In the same year he married Diana Rubin. The task of having to support his parents and a new household and, at the same time, continue graduate school would have been difficult at any time, but it was especially difficult at the height of the Depression. The experience radicalized Trilling. He became profoundly alienated from the American mainstream. Before the Depression he displayed a typical Mencken-like contempt for American middleclass culture that characterized American intellectuals during the twenties. However, after the onset of the Depression this amused dissatisfaction with American culture turned into a

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<sup>6</sup> Diana Trilling, *The Beginning of the Journey*, 96.

<sup>7</sup> Tanner, *Lionel Trilling*, 18. This information came secondhand from Jacques Barzun, who was Trilling’s closest friend.

profound alienation from not just American culture but the entire political and economic system.<sup>8</sup>

In 1931, Lionel and Diana Trilling joined the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners (NCDPP), which was organized by the Communist Party to aid in the defense of radicals and other victims of political oppression. The NCDPP was typical of the plethora of Communist Party-supported organizations that emerged during the early thirties. Many educated and professional Americans who felt that the traditional liberalism, or even the progressivism, of the previous generation was no longer adequate to address the severe social and economic problems that faced the country were attracted to the party or one of its affiliated organizations. This was the so-called Third Period of the American communist movement. The party was doctrinaire in its condemnation of moderate liberalism and socialism – typically characterizing social democrats as “social fascists.” It was also the time in which Stalin emerged as the supreme Soviet leader and Trotsky was forced into exile. The Trillings were among the small, but as the decade progressed larger and more vocal, group of communist sympathizers who became disillusioned with the party’s refusal to deal with radicals it viewed as Trotskyite. By 1933, the Trillings became associated with the anti-Stalinist Trotskyite faction of the radical left, and were from its conception, considered part of the anti-Stalinist *Partisan Review* circle.

Lionel Trilling remained a radical anti-Stalinist well into the mid-thirties. However, sometime around 1936, Trilling did not so much abandon his radical political stance, but deemphasize it. Perhaps motivated by his near expulsion from graduate

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<sup>8</sup> Diana Trilling, *The Beginning of the Journey*, 145, 190-211; Krupnick, *Lionel Trilling and the Fate of Cultural Criticism*, 36-46. For Lionel Trilling’s own memoir of the thirties, see Lionel Trilling, “Young in the Thirties,” *Commentary* 41 (May, 1966): 43-51.

school, or perhaps due to his increasing interest and involvement on his dissertation project -- a biography of Matthew Arnold -- Trilling focused more and more on the relationship between culture, society, and personality. The Marxist component in his thought was gradually overshadowed by Freudianism. Trilling found in Freud a unique synthesis of the empiricism of the Enlightenment and the idealism of the Romantic era. At the same time, Trilling increasingly regarded Marx as a thinker who ruthlessly oversimplified human activity. In contrast, Trilling believed that Freud demonstrated -- especially in *Civilization and Its Discontents* -- a tragic understanding of human existence that recognized that the tension between the individual and society was inevitable and would ultimately resist efforts to eliminate it.<sup>9</sup> In other words, Trilling rejected Marx's belief that alienation was a product of a class conflict that would be resolved at some point in the future. Instead of viewing the individual's conflict with society as a product of class conflict, Trilling saw this conflict as being the central fact of human history and the proper focus of art and literature. This conflict, Trilling thought, could not be resolved, but art and literature -- and criticism -- could provide insight and a momentary sense of equilibrium.

Trilling found Freud's insights invaluable while he was writing his dissertation on Matthew Arnold.<sup>10</sup> When Trilling began the Arnold project in the early thirties, he was a committed Marxist and feared that Arnold, a paradigm of the Victorian middleclass, had little to say to the contemporary radical. But Trilling's view began to change as the project progressed. Encouraged by the critic Edmund Wilson, Trilling discovered that the questions that Arnold addressed in the nineteenth century were actually quite similar

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<sup>9</sup> Chace, *Lionel Trilling: Criticism and Politics*, 87-90.

<sup>10</sup> For the effects of Arnold on Trilling, see Krupnick, *Lionel Trilling and the Fate of Cultural Criticism*, 51-55, 62-63, 88-89; Tanner, *Lionel Trilling*, 29-43; Chace, *Lionel Trilling: Criticism and Politics*, 43-60.

to those that preoccupied radical intellectuals in the 1930s.<sup>11</sup> Just as Trilling struggled with the meaning of the Russian Revolution and its Stalinist turn, Arnold struggled to understand the French Revolution and its implications. Also, Arnold was preoccupied by the meaning and origins of social class, something of which Trilling as both a radical and a status-conscious aspiring professional was acutely aware. And, finally, Arnold echoed Freud's description of the individual in an irresolvable conflict with society, when he insisted that the fundamental purpose of literature was to explore the problematic relation between the self and society.

What emerged from Trilling's work on Arnold was a remarkable synthesis of ideas that incorporated elements of Freud and Marx (especially its Hegelian historical perspective), as well as Arnold. From Freud, Trilling understood Arnold's criticism as an exploration of the tension between the individual and society. Furthermore, Trilling described Arnold's conception of the purpose of literature in psychoanalytic terms. "Relevancy and accuracy, in short, are not enough to justify a work," explained Trilling, "it must be judged by its psychological and moral effect on the whole personality of the reader. Looking for a psychological therapeutic, Arnold finds it in the stability or poise of the faculties which follows upon the *catharsis* Aristotle had described, the quieting of the mind and equilibrium, not the bald presentation of the confusion itself."<sup>12</sup>

Trilling took Arnold's classically derived analysis of literature and gave it a modern therapeutic purpose. This is not to say that Trilling believed that literature ought to be utilitarian. Clearly that was not Arnold's conception, and as self-proclaimed modernist (and anti-Stalinist), Trilling abhorred any suggestion that literature ought to

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<sup>11</sup> Krupnick, *Lionel Trilling and the Fate of Cultural Criticism*, 51.

<sup>12</sup> Lionel Trilling, *Matthew Arnold*, 1st ed., (New York, 1939), 150-151.

serve a middlebrow purpose. Quite the contrary, Trilling celebrated Arnold's "aristocratic" conception of literature; a conception that Trilling believed implied "that true art can settle no questions, give no directives, and that it can do no more than cultivate what is best in the reader -- his moral poise."<sup>13</sup> Art then was a refuge but not an escape. It was a way to gain perspective and invigorate the mind. Art was for Arnold -- according to Trilling -- a way to stimulate fresh thinking. The Victorian critic was nearly transformed by Trilling into a modern proponent of the avant-garde.

Trilling also came close to describing Arnold as a Marxist, at least in terms of his understanding of history. "There was one critical lesson that Arnold never ceased to teach," Trilling observed, "and that was that history must be considered neutrally -- and dialectically."<sup>14</sup> Arnold knew, Trilling argued, that "a thing that is good at one point in the historical process may lose its virtue at another and that an idea or an institution, harmful now, may once have been necessary and good."<sup>15</sup> Thus Arnold was in a sense a progressive. But he was for Trilling a realistic and practical progressive, who understood the limitations of his particular brand of progressivism -- that is, Victorian liberalism. "He knew perfectly well," Trilling explained, "that one of the last English illusions is that 'one class is capable of properly speaking for another.'

He knew too that "free political institutions do not guarantee the well-being of the toiling class." He knew that with the Murdstone-class of manufacturers rested the moral responsibility for the creation of the "hell-holes" of the manufacturing towns,

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 180. Trilling also included a footnote attached to this line that contains a long quotation from *Ludwig Feuerbach*, by Friedrich Engels, which described how history must be understood as a "process" rather than as "a complex of ready-made things." Trilling concluded the note: "At the risk of seeming to call Arnold a Marxist, I use this well-known statement of the method of dialectic materialism to underscore and illuminate Arnold's characteristic method of judgment. The method is especially marked in Arnold's treatment of religion."

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

the responsibility for the overproduction of cheap stuff and the subsequent abandonment of the enterprises, the sudden unemployment, [and] the privation.<sup>16</sup>

There were limits, though, to how contemporary Trilling was able to make Arnold sound. There was no way to ignore Arnold's essentialist notions, especially when it came to the subject of race. Trilling frankly admitted that Arnold's understanding of "race" and "blood" as the inborn "style" of particular groups of people was morally and scientifically untenable. However, Trilling, pointed out that Arnold did not employ the concept with malicious intent, and it still could be understood as "a kind of parable."<sup>17</sup> Also, when it came to particular examples of aesthetic standards of taste, Trilling was not always in agreement with Arnold. He believed that Arnold often displayed too limited a conception of what constituted a proper *catharsis* or resolution for a piece of literature. This in turn suggested to Trilling that Arnold had too limited an appreciation of the complexity of the human mind. The most ironic disagreement in matters of taste between Trilling and Arnold was that Trilling appreciated Arnold's early poetry more than Arnold, who believed that his poems were too "melancholy." Trilling, on the other hand, placed Arnold's early poetry squarely within a Western tradition of literature -- beginning with *Faust*, and continuing with the latest modernist works, such as *The Wasteland* and *Remembrance of Things Past* -- that was "based on the dialogue of the mind itself."<sup>18</sup>

Of course, what Trilling distilled from Arnold were not specific aesthetic values, but rather an overall approach to criticism, which Trilling would emulate for the rest of his career. This approach had several important broad themes. The first was that literature ought to be evaluated on the basis of how well it depicts the tension between the

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 385-386.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 232-233.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 154.

“self and society,” or how well it illustrates the social origins of emotions. Trilling also appreciated Arnold’s understanding of disinterestedness. This was a kind of objectivity, although certainly not a position of value neutrality. In a sense, Trilling understood Arnold’s position as a plea for rationality, intelligent and careful thought, and a warning against precipitous action or judgment.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps, though, the most important idea that Trilling derived from Arnold was a concept of culture. For Arnold, culture was not simply *belle lettres*. He understood that in the modern age, science and other practical forms of knowledge were as much a part of a nation’s culture as the traditional high arts. Yet he was not willing to place “humanistic studies” in a secondary role behind science. He believed that all facets of culture informed one another and that “science relates only to intellect and knowledge, whereas culture relates all [facets of human life] and connects each to the others.”<sup>20</sup> This was not a twentieth-century anthropological definition of culture. Arnold (and Trilling) still had in mind what can be best described as a high culture. Indeed, the purpose of the critic was to distinguish the baser elements of human interaction from “culture.” Yet it was a more encompassing definition of culture, and a more encompassing description of the critic’s purview, than what might be considered the classical definition of the humanities, or even what some of Trilling’s modernist contemporaries would describe as the proper object and subject of sophisticated criticism.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, Trilling continually tried to employ what he understood as Arnold’s “historical and dialectical” method. In practice this had relatively little to do with a particular philosophical outlook, and instead it involved a critical style that attempted to

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<sup>19</sup> Tanner, *Lionel Trilling*, 35-38.

<sup>20</sup> Trilling, *Matthew Arnold*, 371.

<sup>21</sup> Tanner, *Lionel Trilling*, 37.

avoid fundamental dichotomies. Trilling believed that Arnold avoided the prevalent dichotomies of his day -- materialism and idealism -- and instead tried to “allow them to exist side by side” so that each could “mitigate the excesses of the other in modern life.”<sup>22</sup> Trilling’s criticism would exhibit a similar quality, constantly taking contradictory elements and trends and arriving at a new synthesis that did not necessarily resolve the contradiction, but rather provided new insight into the paradoxes of the human condition.

Trilling’s book on Matthew Arnold was well received. In many ways the book had something for everyone. On the one hand, Trilling appealed to left-wing modernists by describing Arnold’s approach as “psychoanalytical” and “dialectical.” Even if they ultimately rejected the notion of Matthew Arnold being a proto-modernist critic, the left-wing modernists would still find that Trilling was speaking their language. On the other hand, Trilling revived interest in an eminent Victorian (or at least the son of an eminent Victorian) who personified the genteel values of a general liberal education. Thus the book also attracted readers from an older generation, especially one that revered Anglo-Saxon culture.

It seems as though *Matthew Arnold* was carefully calculated to further Trilling’s career. There is, however, something undeniably appropriate about the book. It near perfectly reflects Trilling’s ambivalences. He was -- certainly at this time -- committed to the modernist aesthetic and what might be called a modernist philosophical outlook, and the book clearly reflects this. Yet Trilling was drawn to the culture of the mid-Victorian era, and the generalized liberal humanism that Matthew Arnold promoted always appealed to him. It is ironic that Trilling, who was associated with the *Partisan*

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 38.

*Review* and its condemnation of the middlebrow, had a sensibility that can be in part described as middlebrow. In 1939, these tendencies were not immediately apparent, but as his career advanced, especially in its late stages, Trilling would express a frustration with the concept of the avant-garde and increasingly celebrated the literature of the nineteenth century at the expense of the modernist canon.

The book certainly got Trilling an academic appointment by attracting the favorable attention of Columbia University president, Nicholas Murry Butler. In 1939, Lionel Trilling was appointed an assistant professor of English at Columbia University. He was the first Jew to serve as a permanent faculty in an Ivy League university English department.<sup>23</sup> And in 1945, when he was promoted to associate professor, he was the first Jew to receive tenure. By then Trilling had long cultivated his famously genteel persona. He was, even before the war, widely admired by other New York intellectuals for his poise and manners, as well as for his success within the academic establishment.

Irving Howe expressed the typical view of most New York intellectuals when he identified Trilling as “the most influential mind of the fifties,” and as a man who was able to keep “apart from the disputes agitating the surface of our intellectual life” but, nevertheless, “spoke for the *Zeitgeist*.”<sup>24</sup> In a similar vein, Alfred Kazin described

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<sup>23</sup> As far as I can discern, Trilling was the first Jew appointed to the English department of any major university. Some sources emphasize the fact that he was the first Jew in an Ivy League university, others simply say “university,” and a few just say “Columbia University.” According to Diana Trilling, the appointment would have never occurred had not Lionel, on his own initiative, sent a copy of *Matthew Arnold* to Nicholas Murry Butler. On what Diana Trilling suggests was something of a whim, Butler decided that the book merited an appointment and at a dinner party given, in part, in honor of Lionel and his book -- and at which Diana Trilling alleges that Butler drank “a great deal of scotch” -- Butler announced, apparently to the surprise of the head of the English department, that Trilling must be appointed immediately. Soon afterward, Emery Neff, Lionel’s dissertation director, visited the Trillings at their apartment to explain that Lionel’s appointment would not be used to open the department to other Jews. Diana Trilling credited the fact that Lionel was a handsome man, who did not particularly look Jewish, and the fact that his name was somewhat anglicized for his appointment. See Diana Trilling, *The Beginning of the Journey*, 318-322.

<sup>24</sup> Howe, *A Margin of Hope: An Intellectual Autobiography*, 229.

Trilling as a man with a “debonair practiced easiness of manners.” Yet both Kazin and Howe expressed the common feeling among New York intellectuals that contained within Trilling’s serene aloofness was an almost Machiavellian desire to protect his own reputation and a condescending attitude towards those he disagreed with. Kazin, for example, recalled that while he was working for the *New Republic* and trying to solicit an article from Trilling, he was shocked when Trilling frankly told him that he would not write anything that did not “promote [his] reputation.” Furthermore, while Kazin remained on friendly terms with Trilling throughout their lives, he always had the feeling that he was “too Jewish” and too full of “lower-class experience” for Trilling.<sup>25</sup>

Howe’s relationship with Trilling was equally complex and somewhat more difficult. Unlike Kazin, Howe publicly disagreed with Trilling’s political stance. He feared that Trilling’s anti-radicalism was merely an excuse for political quietism or, even worse, a disguised form of conservatism. Throughout the forties, Trilling did not seem bothered by Howe’s opposition, even when it appeared in the *Partisan Review*.<sup>26</sup> Trilling graciously acted as a mentor for Howe, helping him publish a book on Sherwood Anderson and acting as a career counselor and confidant.<sup>27</sup> However, in 1954 Trilling felt that some recent criticism from Howe was unfair, and did not speak to him for at least the next seven years. The two men only cautiously renewed a limited friendship during the 1960s.

The cause of the rift was somewhat a mystery to Howe. While he did criticize Trilling for an essay in which Trilling applauded what he saw as a recent conciliation

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<sup>25</sup> Alfred Kazin, *New York Jew*, (New York, 1978), 43-47.

<sup>26</sup> Irving Howe, "Magazine Chronicle," *Partisan Review* 16 (April, 1949): 416-427.

<sup>27</sup> Irving Howe to Lionel Trilling, July 7, 1949, Box 3, Lionel Trilling Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University; Irving Howe to Lionel Trilling, March 22, Box 3, Lionel Trilling Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University; Howe, *A Margin of Hope: An Intellectual Autobiography*.

between “wealth” and “intellect,” Howe had expressed similar dissatisfaction with Trilling’s political stance in the past without any damage to their personal relationship. In the same year, 1954, Howe also founded the magazine *Dissent*, with the express purpose of combating what he saw as the prevailing anti-radicalism among American intellectuals. Perhaps this is what really vexed Trilling.<sup>28</sup> Whatever the cause of the disagreement, the seven-year suspension of the friendship suggests that Trilling was as sensitive and as any of the other New York intellectuals. In his memoir, Howe attributed the estrangement to the intense and argumentative nature of the New York intellectual milieu, where silence and avoidance was often considered better manners than suppressing one’s disagreement and engaging in banal small talk.<sup>29</sup> Clearly Trilling was very much a product of that milieu, and he had thoroughly incorporated its style and characteristic eccentricities within his personality. And yet he somehow managed to convey an image of emotional tranquility and aloofness.

For many of his contemporaries Trilling was an elusive figure. But he was also extraordinarily influential. Howe was not making a spurious claim, or engaging in hyperbole, when he described Trilling as speaking for the *zeitgeist*. One could argue that Howe should have limited his claim to the circle of New York intellectuals. Yet Trilling’s influence among the mid-century New York intellectuals was considerable, and it came at a time when the influence of the New York intellectuals was at its height. New York City had long been a commercial center for the United States, but in the years after World War II, it became an international cultural center that, for a time, eclipsed the war-

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<sup>28</sup> Howe, *A Margin of Hope: An Intellectual Autobiography*, 213, 229-232.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 323-324.

ravaged cities of Europe.<sup>30</sup> This is not to say that the New York intellectual and artistic community was marginal before the war. Throughout the first decades of the twentieth century, New York was the site of a cultural renaissance. From the start of the century and the beginning of what historian John Patrick Diggins calls the “Lyrical Left” and Henry May calls the “Rebellion,” through the wave of modernism during the 1920s, exemplified by the Harlem Renaissance, and later during the thirties and the emergence of the Old Left, New York City was the home of the American cultural vanguard.<sup>31</sup>

However, the influence that came from the city could be often described as bohemian, avant-garde, or radical. It was in many ways a culture that defined itself in opposition to the mainstream American culture. After the war, this changed. New York was still considered the home of the avant-garde and cultural vanguard, but there was a new anti-radical culture emanating from the city that, while not conservative in a traditional sense, was more accommodating to mainstream American ideology and values. Lionel Trilling was instrumental in the creation of this culture. And the image that he projected, which was so suitable for a career in an academy wary of Jews, gave him an aura of authority inside and, after the war, outside the New York intellectual circle. Trilling’s anti-radicalism was more than an approach toward criticism, or an ideology, it was an intellectual style and sensibility.

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<sup>30</sup> For a general description of the United States and specifically New York as a refuge for high culture during and immediately after the war, see Diggins, *The Proud Decades: 1941-1960*, 220-247; Neil Jumonville, *Critical Crossings: The New York Intellectuals in Postwar America*, (Berkeley, 1991).

<sup>31</sup> For an account of New York’s early twentieth century bohemian culture, see Diggins, *The Rise and Fall of the American Left*, 93-138; Henry F. May, *The End of American Innocence*, Columbia University Press 1992 ed., (New York, 1959), 279-301; Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*, 1st ed., (New York, 1995). For the rise of modernism in New York, see Malcolm Bradbury and Richard Ruland, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism*, (New York, 1991), 269-273; Houston A. Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, (Chicago, 1987). For the thirties and the emergence of the Old Left, as well as the emergence of the literary voice of immigrants, see Bloom, *Prodigal Sons: The New York Intellectuals and Their World*, 29-42; Bradbury and Ruland, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism*, 324-326.

In a series of articles in the late thirties and early forties, Trilling defined the content of this anti-radical style. One of the earliest examples of the anti-radical turn he was making during the late thirties was a 1939 article on Ernest Hemingway.<sup>32</sup> The article was a scathing review of Hemingway's latest play, *The Fifth Column*. What made the review notable, however, was not that Trilling judged Hemingway's latest work as a disappointment, but rather that Trilling attributed Hemingway's failure to the negative reviews that the author received earlier in his career from Marxist critics. Trilling argued that Hemingway seemed to be divided between the "artist" and the "man." The "artist," according to Trilling, was the author of Hemingway's early work, and displayed remarkable consciousness and authenticity. Although there was a kind of violence, even cruelty, in his first books, Trilling believed that the earlier Hemingway was nevertheless able to convey a kind of truth and seriousness, even if it was on occasion unpleasant. For the most part, critics -- and certainly the general audience -- applauded the early Hemingway and looked toward him for a new style in not only writing, but life itself.

However, Trilling believed that there was one notable group of critics who did not approve of Hemingway. These were the critics of the left who condemned Hemingway for his lack of "social feelings" and the "cruelty, religion, anti-intellectualism, even basic fascism" that they saw in his work.<sup>33</sup> The problem with this critique, argued Trilling, was that it mistook the artist for the man. Because of their narrow and literal conception of art, these critics could not discern the subtle distinction between art and life that enabled art to depict the difficulties and complicities of life informatively without necessarily

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<sup>32</sup> Lionel Trilling, "Hemingway and His Critics," in *The Moral Obligation To Be Intelligent*, ed. Leon Wieseltier (New York, 2000), 11-20. This article originally appeared in the Winter 1939 issue of *Partisan Review*.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

morally compromising the artist. Unfortunately, noted Trilling, Hemingway listened to the left-wing critics. He began to use his work as a way to prove that Hemingway the “man” could “muster the required ‘social’ feelings in the required social way,” and produce work that was “positive and constructive and literal.”<sup>34</sup>

Hemingway’s latest work was the play, *The Fifth Column*, which depicted the siege of Madrid during the Spanish Civil War. Trilling judged the play ridiculously simplistic and “sentimental.” It lacked any sense of “dramatic tension,” or “emotional truth.” Yet it was what his critics asked for, and they were willing to overlook the aesthetic flaws of the work to support its antifascist message. Trilling, of course, supported antifascism. But he saw something banal in a statement that ought to be no more surprising than “a declaration against disease would be from a physician.” Furthermore, there was he felt something rather “vulgar” about turning the tragedy of Spain into “a kind of mental hospital for disorganized foreigners who, out of a self-contempt, turn into an ideal of the Spanish people.”<sup>35</sup>

Trilling conveyed in the review the political and aesthetic outlook of the anti-Stalinist left. By panning the play, Trilling expressed his skepticism toward the Popular Front. The message of the play was not just banal. Trilling and the other members of the *Partisan Review* circle felt that, like all the propaganda emanating from the Popular Front, it was insincere. Hemingway’s failure to recognize the real suffering of the Spanish people and instead use Spain as merely a set for an ideological play mirrored, in the minds of many readers of the *Partisan Review* that spring and summer of 1939, the real-life actions of the Soviet Union. The failure of the “artist” Hemingway and the

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 18-19.

ascendancy of the “man” were used by Trilling as a metaphor for the foreboding political climate of the time.

Despite the blatantly political content of the article, and the frenzied political atmosphere in which it was written and read, Trilling insisted it was “not a political essay” and that he was not “concerned with the political consequences of these things, bad though they be and worse though they will be, but only with the cultural consequences.” For Trilling, though, the cultural consequences were intimately connected to the political consequences. He condemned the favorable reviews that *The Fifth Column* received from certain left-wing critics as deliberate acts of aesthetic and intellectual blindness. These critics were encouraging the most simplistic form of art and, Trilling believed, were also encouraging a simplistic political view of the world in which “the piety of ‘good will’ becomes enough” to combat fascism.<sup>36</sup>

Trilling forcefully echoed the *Partisan Review* call for independent politics and, more importantly, independent and individualistic artistic expression. “An attempt has been made,” he warned, “to settle the problem of the artist’s relation to politics by loudly making the requirement that he give up his base individuality and rescue humanity and his own soul by becoming the mouthpiece of a party, a movement, or a philosophy.” This effort did not lead to the “rescue of humanity,” but rather to the “banalities of *The Fifth Column*.” Trilling argued that artist, critics, and audience had to instead learn “not to expect a political, certainly not an immediately political, effect from a work of art.”<sup>37</sup>

In many ways, Trilling replicated the argument against the middlebrow that was made by Macdonald and Greenberg. The literalism and the simplistic and banal

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 20.

depictions of life by middlebrow and Stalinist kitsch were certainly Trilling's primary targets. However, Trilling concluded on a note that implied that he was ideologically moving beyond anti-Stalinism toward anti-radicalism. At the end of his essay, Trilling proclaimed that art had to be relieved of "a burden of messianic responsibility which it never has discharged and cannot discharge, [and it should be left] free to do whatever it actually can do."<sup>38</sup> This call for art to abandon "messianic responsibility" suggested that Trilling was rejecting the idea that art had a revolutionary role. In his article, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," Greenberg also suggested that the avant-garde could not be counted on to advance the cause of socialism. However, by declaring that socialism was needed to protect the avant-garde, Greenberg was still maintaining that art and progressive politics were connected and in some way dependent upon each other.<sup>39</sup> In contrast, Trilling made a stronger plea for a break between art and politics, and even went so far as to propose that true art -- just as the left-wing critics accused Hemingway's early work of doing -- might legitimately portray anti-progressive themes and ideas.

In 1940, Trilling wrote two articles for *Partisan Review* that clearly demonstrated the anti-radical direction of his thought. The first article -- "Parrington, Mr. Smith and Reality" -- was an attack on the aesthetic and political sensibilities of both the Marxist critics of his day and the critics of the progressive era.<sup>40</sup> The article demonstrated Trilling's method of fusing aesthetic and political criticism, and it would become one of his more widely read pieces. Along with a 1946 essay on Theodore Dreiser, the article formed the lead essay, titled "Reality in America," in Trilling's first book of essays, *The*

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," 34-49.

<sup>40</sup> Lionel Trilling, "Parrington, Mr. Smith and Reality," *Partisan Review* 7 (January-February, 1940): 24-40.

*Liberal Imagination*.<sup>41</sup> It was an apropos choice for the first chapter of the book, for the article marked the start of a decade-long polemical effort by Trilling, culminating in the publication of *The Liberal Imagination*, that would define the anti-radical modernist discourse that shaped the outlook of so many liberal intellectuals during the 1950s.

Trilling opened the article by describing some recent appraisals of the historian of American letters, V.L. Parrington, made by the Marxist critics Granville Hicks and Bernard Smith. While these critics admitted that Parrington made aesthetic errors, and Smith argued that Parrington's "method of economic interpretations" was not as sophisticated as the "subtle materialism" used by contemporary Marxist critics, they nevertheless rated the overall political perspective of Parrington's *Main Currents of American Thought* (1927-30) as valid enough to excuse many of its errors in detail.<sup>42</sup> Trilling believed that this was an unacceptable compromise of critical standards and described in his essay how Parrington's flaws have contributed to poor aesthetic standards and a general lack of appreciation of some of the country's most accomplished authors, especially the more difficult nineteenth-century American writers such as Poe, Hawthorne, and Henry James.

Trilling's main point, though, was not to rehabilitate overlooked or misunderstood writers, but rather to expose and denounce the political assumptions that he believed led to those writers being overlooked in the first place. "I cannot help suspecting," Trilling explained, "that Parrington's errors of aesthetic judgment, and Mr. Smith's after him, are important not only to art but to politics." These errors were not simply a matter of bad

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<sup>41</sup> Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, 3-20; Lionel Trilling, "Dreiser and the Liberal Mind," *The Nation*, April 20, 1946, 466-472.

<sup>42</sup> Trilling, "Parrington, Mr. Smith and Reality," 26-27.

taste, argued Trilling, but are in fact, “errors of assumption.”<sup>43</sup> Parrington was guided by his conception of Jeffersonian democracy, and he judged examples of American culture on the basis of whether they promoted “Democracy,” or impeded it. This was for Trilling an inexcusable naiveté that allowed Parrington to overlook the complexities of reality, as well as to lead him to misunderstand some of the most subtle creations of American cultural life. And the more recent Marxist critics were, according to Trilling, compounding Parrington’s errors with an even more doctrinaire approach to criticism. “I am sure that Mr. Smith passionately wants in politics what he thinks will be best for a great many people, I am not sure, however, that this will be the broadest possible democracy,” Trilling concluded on an ominous note.<sup>44</sup>

The second Trilling article that appeared in *Partisan Review* in 1940 exposed just how far Trilling was willing to stray from what he called at this time “progressive orthodoxy.”<sup>45</sup> Although not as well known as “Parrington, Mr. Smith and Reality,” this article -- titled “Elements That Are Wanted” -- is in many ways more revealing. The essay addressed T.S. Eliot’s recently published book, *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939). Eliot’s conservative political and cultural views had been providing progressive-minded modernists difficulties for the past decade. As a poet, and to a lesser extent as a critic, Eliot was one of the leaders of aesthetic modernism. But by the early thirties, Eliot was routinely expressing a conservative political outlook and a traditional religious demeanor in his writings. For the kind of doctrinaire Marxist critic that the *Partisan Review* circle condemned, the incongruity between Eliot’s avant-garde art and his reactionary politics was easily resolved -- the art was condemned as reactionary as well. However, for the

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>45</sup> Lionel Trilling, “Elements That Are Wanted,” *Partisan Review* 7 (September-October, 1940): 367-379.

anti-Stalinist left, supporting Eliot's art and at the same time condemning his politics became something of an ideological -- if somewhat schizophrenic -- imperative.

Eliot's latest book, however, was especially difficult for the *Partisan Review* circle to accept. Unlike his play, *Murder in the Cathedral*, which could be interpreted by the audience in a variety of ways, this new book was a candid essay on political philosophy. In *The Idea of a Christian Society*, Eliot described his ideal society, and it could not be further from what the typical New York intellectual would consider an acceptable society, never mind an ideal one. The society depicted in the book was one that was traditionally oriented and based on Christian ideals. It was essentially an idealized version of medieval European society. There was a state church, an established aristocracy, and an economic system that respected private property but also set limits on production and industrialization. Eliot argued that liberal democracy and indeed the entire Enlightenment project had failed. Once society abandoned the absolute values provided by Christianity, he argued that it was inevitable that the culture would descend into a nihilism that obliterated all moral values, leaving civilization vulnerable to totalitarianism.

Trilling began the essay by describing how John Stuart Mill wrote sympathetically about the religious and conservative Coleridge. Mill argued that liberals (in this case Benthamites) could learn from a conservative writer. Although Mill did not agree with Coleridge, he recognized that the Romantic philosopher had an ability "to see further into the complexities of human feelings and intellect" than Jeremy Bentham's "too short and easy political analysis." Mill feared that his liberal friends need to be

challenged to constantly rethink their assumptions. He told them that they should pray for enlightened enemies, for “we are in danger from their folly, not their wisdom.”<sup>46</sup>

Trilling argued in a similar manner that modern-day progressives ought to open their minds to Eliot, if for no other reason than to sharpen their own arguments. Trilling reassured his readers that he did not endorse “Mr. Eliot’s religious politics.” “I say no more than *recommend to the attention*: I certainly do not recommend Mr. Eliot’s ideas to the allegiance,” Trilling reiterated. But he added, “here we are, a very small group and quite obscure; our possibility of action is suspended by events; perhaps we have never been more vocal and perhaps soon we can hope to be no more than thoughtful; our relations with the future are dark and dubious. There is, indeed, only one connection with the future of which we can be to any extent sure: our pledge to the critical intellect.”<sup>47</sup>

Eliot may have “escaped into the arms of Anglo-Catholic theology,” Trilling admitted. But he asked, was Eliot’s escapism any worse than the escapism -- the “surrender” and “faith” in “authority” -- that had been displayed by Marxist critics during the past decade?<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, although Trilling disagreed with Eliot’s conclusions, he did agree with Eliot’s point of departure, which was that although liberal democracy is different and preferable to totalitarianism, it nevertheless lacked the ability to resist totalitarianism effectively. Some principles beyond liberalism and democracy had to be developed to oppose totalitarianism. The principles that Eliot put forth -- a Christian society -- was for Trilling simply not a living option. He did not fear that Eliot was trying to impose his theological dogma on unbelievers, and Trilling believed that Eliot was sincere when he promised that his Christian society would be tolerant. The problem

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 367.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 368.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 369.

was that the Christian society that Eliot described had already been tried and it had failed. “We must not put inadequate answers into Mr. Eliot’s mouth,” Trilling explained, “but it is indeed hard to imagine the answer that will satisfy our historical skepticism, a skepticism which is aroused, too, by Mr. Eliot’s unexpressed sense that there was once a past whose political virtues are worthy and possible of recapture.”<sup>49</sup>

Although Trilling rejected Eliot’s Christian society and unrealistic, he was sympathetic to Eliot’s description of the problem of modern society -- that is, modern society lacks a moral sense. “Now I do not think, with Mr. Eliot, that morality is absolute,” Trilling clarified, “but I do believe that his way of considering morality has certain political advantages over Trotsky’s way or the Marxist way in general.” Trilling believed that the radical culture of his time encouraged the consideration of “immediate ends” over “ultimate ends.” The question of whether the means are justified by the ends is not easy to answer, and Trilling did not tritely denounce the tactics of radicals. Instead he argued that what was needed was a “social imagination” or a “moral interest” that explored this problem, rather than simply dismissing it as irrelevant. Trilling insisted that the novel provided an ideal means to examine and, in a sense, experiment, with the moral difficulties inherent in society.<sup>50</sup>

With this essay, Trilling moved from the anti-Stalinist left to an explicit anti-radical position. He denounced both “Trotsky’s way” and the “Marxist way,” by which he meant Stalinism. Trilling also made it clear that like Eliot, he also believed that liberalism was inadequate. Trilling’s anti-radicalism was not, however, conservative in any positive sense. The idea that “tradition” could provide concrete values, or a blueprint

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 371.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 374.

for society, was absurd to Trilling. He also recognized the difficulty in describing absolute values in a rapidly changing world. Nevertheless, Trilling was convinced that although Eliot's "supernaturalism" could not offer solutions to a modern world, his critique "suggests elements which a rational and naturalistic philosophy, to be adequate, must encompass."<sup>51</sup> And in order to achieve a "rational and naturalistic philosophy" that possessed a "moral imagination," Trilling developed an anti-radical criticism and embarked on a decade-long polemic to undermine the accepted political dichotomies and assumptions of his fellow intellectuals.

For the most part, Lionel Trilling's political activity was confined to his writing. He did belong to several anti-communist organizations during the 1940s, but his active participation was limited. Actually, his wife, Diana, was far more involved in political action. By the end of the decade, she was a member of the executive board of the anticommunist American Committee for Cultural Freedom.<sup>52</sup> Diana Trilling also wrote explicit political pieces that were -- to say the least -- intensely anticommunist.<sup>53</sup> Lionel, in contrast, stuck to literary criticism. In part this was simply in keeping with his cultivated genteel image. Nevertheless, although Trilling tried to stay above the extreme partisanship of the forties, his work had an explicit political purpose. Trilling believed that by cultivating what he understood was a superior taste in literature he could help create the cultural conditions that could lead to the development of a genuinely new political mentality -- one that was especially suited for a post-radical era.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 379.

<sup>52</sup> Diana Trilling, *The Beginning of the Journey*, 181-182. For an account of Diana Trilling's enthusiasm at the time see, Frances Stoner Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War*, (New York, 1999), 157-158.

<sup>53</sup> For example, Diana Trilling, "A Memorandum on the Hiss Case," *Partisan Review* 18 (May-June, 1950): 484-500.

The key to Trilling's polemic was his "therapeutic" understanding of literature and criticism. In *Matthew Arnold*, Trilling described what he understood Arnold as employing therapeutic approach to literature. Whether or not this is an accurate description of Arnold is less relevant than the fact that it certainly describes Trilling's approach to literature. He saw reading and criticism as almost a kind of self-analysis, as a way to probe the irrational corners of the mind and gain insight, and thereby a certain measure of control over the irrational aspects of life. The critic's job then was to help the reader gain this insight by pushing him or her toward more difficult and troubling literature that addressed the mind's conflicted interactions with society. In short, Trilling believed that like a psychotherapist, literature and criticism could act as a way to illuminate suppressed conflicted feelings and to dispel illusions.

During the 1940s, Trilling thought that the most important illusion that needed to be dispelled was the belief in teleology. He was convinced that as long as liberals and progressives clung to the unrealistic notion that a better future was guaranteed by either progress or dialectical materialism, they would not be able to develop a "moral imagination." This was primarily for Trilling a personal psychological problem rather than an ideological problem. He understood the illusion of teleology as less a manifestation of consciously held beliefs than as a lack of individual insight and maturity. In his only novel, *The Middle of the Journey* (1947), Trilling used the revelation of one character that he had been a fool -- really a kind of child -- to follow the Communist Party's directions blindly:

The well-loved child of the middle class is taught about the future by means of the promises made to him -- the birthday gifts will come and the Christmas gifts will come and the performance at the Hippodrome, and camp and college and the trip to Europe. And all the promises and their fulfillment are symbolic of the great

promise made to him by everyone that he will grow and change. This great promise he takes into himself in the form of a pledge -- made to himself and to everyone -- that he will grow and change for the better. He takes it into himself too in the particular form of his vision of time, in which the future is always brighter and more spacious than the present. How the mind of the fortunate young man of the middle class is presided over by the future! It is his mark, his muse -- for it is feminine in its seductiveness -- and sets him apart from the young men of the truly lower class and from the young men of the truly upper class. [...] [T]he promises of the future might have its uses as a way of seducing the child to maturity, but maturity itself meant that the future and the present were brought together that you lived your life *now* instead of preparing and committing yourself to some better day to come.<sup>54</sup>

For Trilling then anti-radicalism was no so much a matter of turning against your previous held beliefs, but rather a matter of outgrowing them. And during the 1940s, he used his criticism to set standards of taste that he believed would help American intellectuals out-grow what he understood as their long cherished illusions.

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<sup>54</sup> Lionel Trilling, *The Middle of the Journey*, 2d ed., (New York, 1975), 139.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### **Richard Chase: “As Lionel Trilling has said ...”**

Immediately after Pearl Harbor, the editors of *Partisan Review* agreed to disagree on the topic of the war, but as Dwight Macdonald withdrew from the editorial staff in 1943, Rahv and Williams turned the journal into something akin to a modernist booster for American patriotism.<sup>1</sup> In the January-February issue, the first of a two-part series of articles, titled “The New Failure of Nerve,” appeared in *Partisan Review*. The lead article was written by Sidney Hook and was an impassioned defense of traditional liberal rationalism. The essay drew its title from a phrase used in Gilbert Murray’s *Four Stages of Greek Religion* (1912), which was used to describe the cultural malaise that affected late antiquity as Greeks and Romans increasingly retreated from rational philosophy and practical pursuits to the supernaturalism of the pagan mystery cults and early Christianity. Hook believed that the phrase, “failure of nerve,” was also an apt description of what seemed to be happening in the liberal democracies of the West. He saw many intellectuals making “the same flight from responsibility” that had occurred in ancient times. Instead of defending the rational principles of the Enlightenment against the forces of totalitarianism, too many Western intellectuals became quietists who turned to either a revived form of the old “obscurantism” of religion or a new radical ideology that promised a better life to come after the revolution.<sup>2</sup> In either case, Hook observed,

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<sup>1</sup> For the change in editorial policy when Macdonald left, see Cooney, *The Rise of the New York Intellectuals*, 192-195; Bloom, *Prodigal Sons: The New York Intellectuals and Their World*, 129-133; Wald, *The New York Intellectuals*, 210-212.

<sup>2</sup> Sidney Hook, “The New Failure of Nerve,” *Partisan Review* 10 (January-February, 1943): 2-23.

these intellectuals took on a posture of detachment and acted as though they had little stake in the conflict between liberalism and totalitarianism. Indeed, it appeared to Hook that these anti-liberal and anti-rational intellectuals blamed the principles of the Enlightenment for the rise of totalitarianism. “They allege,” Hook explained, “that the bankruptcy of Western European civilization is the direct result of the bankruptcy of the scientific and naturalistic spirit.”<sup>3</sup>

While Hook did not say so explicitly, the insinuation was clear -- some intellectuals were not fully behind the war effort, at least not to the extent that they ought to be. There is some irony in *Partisan Review* publishing Hook’s polemic when, just a little more than a year before, it was publishing furious denouncements of the efforts of Archibald MacLeish and Van Wyck Brooks to shame the “irresponsible” intellectuals to fulfill their obligation to defend Western civilization.<sup>4</sup> For the most part, Hook’s essay was directed against the contemporary revival of serious religious thinking. In particular, he attacked the neo-orthodox theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, accusing Niebuhr of promoting a romanticized conception of human history. It was a terribly unfair characterization on Hook’s part, and he and his mentor, John Dewey, clearly misunderstood Niebuhr’s position, which actually called for a new realism that recognized the limits of ideological thinking.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Tate et al., "On the 'Brooks-MacLeish Thesis'," 8-47; Macdonald, "Kulturbolschewismus is Here," 442-451.

<sup>5</sup> For the conflict between Hook and Niebuhr, see Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, (New York, 1985), 214-220. Fox speculates that Hook misread Niebuhr’s position because of Niebuhr’s close friendship with Waldo Frank and Lewis Mumford, who were at the time arguing that rationalism was a spent force. Niebuhr believed that human beings were flawed, imperfect creatures and that there were limits to what rational thought could discern, but he did not subscribe to the romantic humanism that Frank and Mumford were promoting, and certainly believed that rationalism was preferable to any thought based on emotionalism. Niebuhr had, in the past, criticized John Dewey for having a naïve faith in human reason and not recognizing that rationalism could be as easily used for evil as it could for good. This no doubt

Niebuhr ignored the article, but some readers of the *Partisan Review* did object. Meyer Schapiro, an old classmate of Trilling, thought that Hook sounded too much like MacLeish and that the essay suggested that there was an ominous campaign brewing against anyone one who was less than an enthusiastic supporter of the war. Apparently, this was not an unreasonable supposition. When Schapiro told Hook privately that he intended to respond publicly to the article, Hook suggested that he use a pseudonym, “David Merian,” to protect Schapiro’s job at Columbia University. During the First World War, Columbia University dismissed several professors for opposition to the war.<sup>6</sup> Fortunately, in this instance, history did not repeat itself. Nevertheless, Schapiro’s reply set off a firestorm of controversy within the New York intellectual community. In the form of Hook’s rebuttal, the controversy began the first public manifestation of the anti-radical campaign that would characterize the *Partisan Review* during the early Cold War period.

Shapiro was not a religious man and did not object to Hook’s characterization of the recently revived theology of the day as a new “obscurantism.” He did, however, object to the way Hook gratuitously grouped the anti-war left with the theologians, describing both groups as romantic and unrealistic. “Hook amalgamates the criticism of the war as an imperialist struggle with the failure of nerve and religious hysteria,” Shapiro complained, and added that Hook, “attacks the anti-war left as Platonists, bohemians, drunkards, lunatics and metaphysical obscurantists, and herds them with

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also contributed to Hook’s attack. In the same issue of *Partisan Review*, indeed part of the same “Failure of Nerve” series, Dewey had an essay defending naturalism, see John Dewey, “Anti-Naturalism in Extremis,” *Partisan Review* 10 (January-February, 1943): 24-39.

<sup>6</sup> Wald, *The New York Intellectuals*, 212.

reactionary religious thought and the enemies of progress.”<sup>7</sup> Shapiro then launched a strident defense of the anti-war left that echoed the thought of Dwight Macdonald and the outlook of his new journal, *politics*.

Hook did not retreat in the face of Shapiro’s challenge. Quite the contrary, in a provocatively titled essay, “The Politics of Wonderland,” Hook attacked what he called “words drawn from third-period Stalinism set to a Trotskyist chant.” In a series of enumerated points, Hook made it clear that the leftist position that Merian (Shapiro) represented was, at best, a political and intellectual dead-end that had been discredited in the last decade. “As for Merian’s position on the war, the future of socialism, and a program for the labor movement,” Hook declared in his conclusion, “I submit that it exhibits sickly failure of nerve, social irresponsibility, and absence of concrete political intelligence. His sobriety I take for granted; but with such a set of beliefs, it is a strictly minor virtue.”<sup>8</sup>

The Shapiro-Hook exchange marked the beginning of a renewed internecine struggle on the political left. Unlike, however, the sectarian struggles of the 1930s, this struggle would have implications beyond the rather small and insular community of New York intellectuals and leftists. Their conflict would merge with the larger nascent Cold War. Over the next decade, there would be a struggle to control various American institutions -- the universities, the unions, the Democratic Party -- and purge them of what was described at the time as Stalinist influence. Hook represented the faction of the left that became, in many ways, nearly indistinguishable from the anticommunist right in its desire to eliminate any communist influence. However, some other intellectuals, such as

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<sup>7</sup> David Merian, "The Nerve of Sidney Hook," *Partisan Review* 10 (May-June, 1943), 248-257.

<sup>8</sup> Sidney Hook, "The Politics of Wonderland," *Partisan Review* 10 (May-June, 1943), 258-262.

Lionel Trilling, sought not so much to expose the “Stalinist” influenced and directed intellectuals, but rather to frame the discourse in such a way that radicalism could no longer be clearly expressed.

In the March 1943 issue of *Partisan Review*, an article appeared by Columbia University graduate student Richard Chase. It was Chase’s first major article for the publication and represented his entry into the discourse over the nature and meaning of contemporary liberalism. The article was featured as part of the continuing series addressing the liberal “failure of nerve.” At first glance, it seems odd that a relatively unknown graduate student would be featured in a series that included such luminaries as, Sidney Hook, John Dewey, Ernest Nagel, and Ruth Benedict. However, while Chase may have been a humble graduate student, he was also a protégé of Lionel Trilling. Over the next decade, Chase would staunchly defend and promote Lionel Trilling’s version of anti-radical modernism, as well as employ this anti-radical modernism in his own critical examination of nineteenth century American literature. This article represented the first public manifestation of the intellectual evolution that Chase was undergoing as he developed a finer understanding of Trilling’s approach to criticism. For a time, Chase became publicly very closely associated with his mentor’s views.

In keeping with Sidney Hook’s theme of the defense of the Enlightenment, Chase’s 1943 article attacked what he understood as the threatening tide of mysticism emanating from Aldous Huxley and Gerald Heard.<sup>9</sup> Huxley and Heard were in many ways easy targets. The two friends had recently relocated from England to California to promote their mixture of modern science, psychology and mysticism. For most New

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Chase, "The Huxley-Heard Paradise," *Partisan Review* 10 (March-April, 1943), 143-158. For an earlier example of Chase’s critique of Huxley, see Richard Chase, "Yogi-Bogey," *Partisan Review* 9 (May-June, 1942): 262-264.

York intellectuals Huxley and Heard had drifted beyond mere eccentricity into pure folly. Their interest in eastern mysticism and their association with the founder of the Vedanta Society of Southern California, Swami Prabhavanand, did not strike most of the readers of *Partisan Review* as a healthy interest in non-Western cultures. Rather, it was seen as an untimely, perhaps cowardly, escape from the real and pressing problems facing the world -- the war and the fight against totalitarianism.

The editors of *Partisan Review* and the authors of the “failure of nerve” series were perhaps less concerned with Huxley and Heard’s withdrawal from the world than with their history of pacifism, which, by 1943, they understood as a failure to oppose fascism. Huxley, especially, seemed to personify the “failure of nerve” more than anyone else. He came from a family of scientists whose creed was the values of the Enlightenment. However, in the minds of many liberal-minded people it appeared that the popular author abandoned traditional liberal political theory in the wake of the First World War. Huxley was not alone. His dystopian novel *A Brave New World* (1932) captured as well as any piece of interwar period literature the widespread disillusionment of Western intellectuals with the nineteenth-century belief in progress and faith in science. But it was his political and philosophical writings and activities, rather than his fiction, that aroused the concern of Chase. Huxley was an iconoclast and a wickedly satirical critic of modernity. Yet he also personified for many of the readers of *Partisan Review* the sins of the interwar smart set. His 1927 book *Proper Studies* was a sardonic collection of essays critical of the conventional wisdom of liberals. Democracy was, for Huxley, simply the particular prejudice of our time, and not a timeless principle on which a society could be organized. If there was a unifying theme for Huxley, it was skepticism

– skepticism toward every modern ideal and shibboleth. “The greater part of the world’s philosophy and theology,” he wrote, “is merely an intellectual justification for the wishes and the day-dreams of philosophers and theologians.”<sup>10</sup> While Huxley’s antinomian skepticism suited the twenties, his refusal to make moral distinctions among the competing ideologies of the thirties, along with his absolute support for the pacifist cause, was precisely the kind of moral failure that Hook and the others were condemning as having placed the free world in dire peril.

Huxley, for his part, did not care at all about what New York intellectuals thought of him. In 1937, fleeing Europe and the approaching war, he moved to California where he and Gerald Heard formed a small circle of intellectuals interested in non-Western philosophy, modern spiritualism, and pacifism. In time Huxley and Heard’s interest in comparative religion, the Vedic Swami Prabhavanand, and mystical experiences (included those that were drug induced) would help create what would become, in part, one institutional nucleus for the counter-culture movements of the 1960s. In the 1940s, though, it was Heard’s books on the history of humanity that caught the attention of Chase. In keeping with an inter-war cultural mood best epitomized by the work of Spengler and Toynbee, Heard wrote extremely broad histories of humanity in an attempt to discover general laws of social development. He believed that these general laws were scientific in nature. Like Huxley, Heard had personal and professional connections to the scientific community. He also maintained, like Huxley, that his spiritualism was derived from a scientific outlook. During the early thirties Heard was a popular BBC science commentator, and he insisted that his work was based on the “new anthropology” of

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<sup>10</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Proper Studies*, (London, 1949), 9.

Bronislaw Malinowski, Franz Boas, Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, and others. It was this scientific pretension that troubled Chase.

In his critique of Heard, Chase concentrated on three books -- *The Assent of Humanity* (1929), *Social Substance of Religion* (1931), and *The Source of Civilization* (1937) -- which he felt best conveyed Heard's mixture of science and religion. In these three books, Heard described a theory of history based on the idea that humanity is progressively moving through five stages. His historical outlook managed neatly to combine several popular interests and beliefs. Foremost among these was the idea of progress, albeit not the material and rational kind of progress favored by liberals and Marxists. Instead, Heard argued that humanity was on the verge of reaching a new level of mass consciousness and to experience a "psychological mutation" that would usher in a new golden age.<sup>11</sup> Heard's ideas were based on an odd mix of modern social science and Eastern mysticism. He developed a peculiar conception of historicism based on his understanding of anthropology. According to Heard, humanity had experienced radically different epochs of consciousness that shaped different and conflicting perceptions of reality. It remained for the fifth and final epoch to reconcile and unify these different consciousnesses and thereby create the conditions necessary for world peace.

Chase pointed out that Heard was not simply wrong – he was exactly wrong. Above all, Heard misread Malinowski. Chase explained that Malinowski and the other proponents of the new anthropology – what would become known as the "culture and personality school" -- described discrete cultures, each with a unique perspective of the world and each equally complex. These anthropologists, according to Chase, shunned any "monistic succession" that would justify any of Heard's generalizations. Indeed, the

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<sup>11</sup> Chase, "The Huxley-Heard Paradise," 152-3.

relativism of the new anthropology eroded the concept of “primitive” and found individual psychology at work in all cultures. Furthermore, it maintained that any cultural hierarchy or teleology was scientifically untenable. However, it was not this misreading of contemporary anthropology, or even Heard’s bizarre notions regarding sexual continence and human consciousness, that Chase found so appalling. It was Heard and Huxley’s mysticism and their use of mythic poetry as a substitute for reason and rational political action. “To Gerald Heard and Aldous Huxley,” Chase observed, “mysticism is the method of *thinking* or perhaps *feeling* a new society into being.”<sup>12</sup> In short, Huxley and Heard had done nothing but justify political and social quietism. This was, for Chase, an abdication of moral responsibility.

Like the other authors of the “Failure of Nerve” pieces, Chase feared that Heard and Huxley were merely the tip of the iceberg. It seemed that reason was in retreat all over the world and that secular liberal values were in real danger. “This recrudescence of mysticism,” Chase argued, was not “a triviality of the weary European mind.” Nor was it merely “a literate version of charlatan religions like Theosophy and Spiritualism.” It was more substantial than these fads, and he pointed to Arnold Toynbee as an example of a serious thinker who had also turned away from the secular tradition of the Enlightenment. Toynbee’s *A Study of History*, Chase acknowledged, was “one of the great philosophical visions of society, the vision of a myth-making intellect which makes other historical syntheses seem both parochial and philistine.” Yet Chase was troubled by Toynbee’s conclusions. It seemed to him that Toynbee argued for the creation of a “psychic superman,” and that his “doctrine of Ordeal and Withdrawal” led to the inevitable conclusion that “mind supersedes matter in the process of the universe, and that the

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 146-152.

function of the species is the struggle to reach a realm of being somewhere ‘above’ the region of response and influence for which nature has fitted them.”<sup>13</sup>

A few months later, Chase described in more detail to the readers of *Partisan Review* the anti-liberal premises of Toynbee’s *A Study of History*.<sup>14</sup> The historian, Chase explained, was the latest in a series of intellectuals who rejected the rationalism of the Enlightenment for a mystical understanding of human society based, for the most part, on the Christian conception of Original Sin. And Toynbee was, “with the exception of the neo-Thomasists,” explained Chase, “the most overtly Christian of all” of these latter-day mystics. Like the Christian theologian, Saint Augustine, Toynbee understood progress as “an accession from the earthly City of Destruction to the heavenly City of God.” He rejected the Enlightenment idea, which was so aptly described by Gibbon, that “progress was man’s increasing ability to amend his own ‘crimes, follies and misfortunes,’” for an explicitly spiritual definition of progress. Chase saw Toynbee as part of the general failure of nerve exhibited by Western intellectuals and tied the historian’s work to the quasi-religious nature of modern literature. “The intuitions of the conservative professor of history,” Chase wrote, “have become those of Lawrence, Eliot and Joyce.” It seemed to Chase that the West was repeating “the religious experience of the late days of antiquity” by rejecting secular rationalism.<sup>15</sup>

Chase did see some worthy aspects to Toynbee’s massive work. He admired the sheer scope of *A Study of History*. Toynbee tried to deflate Western ethnocentrism and described twenty-one “civilizations” that he understood as the equal of the West. Furthermore, Toynbee displayed a fine understanding of how environment shaped

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.: 157-158.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Chase, "History vs. The City of God," *Partisan Review* 11 (Winter, 1944), 45-55.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.: 46.

culture. Chase perceived an admirable strain of naturalism throughout *A Study of History*. “Toynbee’s sense of the natural difficulties of human life,” Chase admitted, “lends dignity to his *History*.”<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, this naturalistic interpretation of human history was marred by an underlying theme of supernaturalism. Indeed, Chase observed, it seemed that Toynbee wrote two contradictory books in one. In one, Toynbee insisted that his work was “scientific” and that human history evolves according to definite natural patterns. In the other, Toynbee described a mystical “vital force” – based on Henri Bergson’s concept of *élan* – that propels progress. It is this mystical force that causes spiritual progress and creates exceptional individuals that, in Toynbee’s scheme, form “creative minorities” that inspire and lead civilizations.<sup>17</sup>

Chase recognized that *A Study of History* was not really history at all – certainly not in the modern sense of history. It was instead a kind of morality tale, “a vast drama, in fact, a Greek tragedy.” Toynbee used myth to describe the tragic story of the rise and fall of civilizations, and, especially, the problems that were lately affecting Western civilization. It was, Chase understood, the old story of man caught between God and the devil, and for Toynbee the critical moments of history were when a civilization “withdraws” from the world to contemplate this dilemma and to renew itself spiritually. Chase did not object to Toynbee’s use of myth as a literary device. Indeed, the dissertation that Chase was working on as he wrote this critique of Toynbee was a study and, to an extent, justification of the use of myth in literature. What Chase could not abide was Toynbee’s denunciation of the Enlightenment and his condemnation of modern scientific and pragmatic sensibilities. “We learn [from Toynbee],” Chase wrote, “that

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 52.

during the [growth of a civilization], scientific control over the environment cannot be taken as a criterion of progress.” Furthermore, Chase continued, “we are told that science is a sign of failure.” Toynbee, it seemed to Chase, was confusing the “techniques of industrialization and war with the scientific method, and then convincing himself that the scientific method must be responsible for the plight of the world.”<sup>18</sup>

Chase concluded that although there was a beauty to Toynbee’s synthesis, in the final analysis he substituted myth for history. “As Lionel Trilling has said,” Chase explained, “if the historical sense is always with us, it must, for that reason, be refined and made more exact. Above all, it must be kept complicated.” Trilling argued, Chase pointed out, that history was always an abstraction, and it was important that the historian remember this. Trilling insisted that “we ought to remember that our abstraction is not the equivalent to the infinite complications which we have abstracted. The historian should always be humbly aware of the limits of his abstraction and be willing to complicate it.” For Chase, Toynbee was not humble enough. Although his *A Study of History* condemned the Enlightenment for its hubris, Toynbee displayed his own lack of humility by making grandiose conclusions from flimsy presuppositions. “He constantly,” observed Chase, “makes the unwarranted abstractions of which Trilling speaks: He abstracts a mythical elite from the masses, he abstracts the mind and its processes from their genetic situations and in doing so he all but separates history from man.”<sup>19</sup>

Chase, like most of the *Partisan Review* circle, believed that a secular rationalistic liberalism was still relevant in the modern world. However, his commitment to rationalism and the values of the Enlightenment was not without reservations. Trilling’s

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 55.

call for a sense of complexity cut two ways for Chase. He recognized that authors like Toynbee, and even Heard and Huxley, tapped into the psychological need to explain the irrational and mysterious elements in human existence. Thus, for Chase, the austere empiricism of Sidney Hook committed the same sin of ignoring the complications of human existence that Toynbee perpetrated in his work. This is not to say that Chase ever considered committing himself to a strictly spiritual or religious understanding of the world; he always believed this to be nothing less than a flight from reality. However, Chase found something deeply appealing in Trilling's call for a "complicated" understanding of history, and life in general.

As a Ph.D. candidate in English Literature, Chase wanted to identify and encourage a literature that could in a realistic manner depict and comprehend the irrational. This meant that Chase was not interested in a purely aesthetic literary criticism, such as the critical method that was becoming increasingly popular in the academy -- the so-called New Criticism. Instead, the criticism that Chase employed was an interdisciplinary approach that utilized the latest social scientific concepts, especially when it came to psychology and cultural anthropology. Furthermore, Chase insisted that literature and literary criticism had to be relevant in a political and social sense. However, it had to have more than a mere polemical purpose. It had to inform and illuminate the complexities of human existence, rather than simplify them for the sake of ideological consistency. In short, Chase envisioned the kind of criticism and literature described by Lionel Trilling.

Richard Chase arrived in Columbia University in the late thirties, received an M.A from the university in 1939, and continued to study there as a Ph.D. candidate

throughout the early forties. At the time, Lionel Trilling was a new English professor who was acquiring a reputation as a superb essayist. Chase was drawn to Trilling. He not only admired Trilling's work, but also saw in Trilling an ideal of the politically engaged critic. It appears that Chase was only tangentially exposed to the great ideological battle revolving around the Popular Front and never was particularly impressed by Marxism. In fact, as Chase later confessed to his close friend F.W. Dupee, that he was at heart a "genteel" man of letters who had been far more influenced by the Calvinism of Chase's native New England than Marxism, in either its Stalinist or Trotskyite guise.<sup>20</sup> Thus, Chase was atypical of most New York intellectuals. He never felt completely comfortable in the city and maintained – whether it was an annual summer retreat to the New England or a daily commute to suburban New Jersey – some tie to the countryside, someplace away from the distinctly urban, to retreat and to refresh himself. At first glance, the quintessential New York intellectual, Lionel Trilling, and the somewhat conservative -- in terms of his social views rather than politics -- New Englander, Chase, are an odd pair. Yet Trilling and his brand of literary criticism was not only intellectually appealing to Chase. It seems that Trilling's gentlemanly posture, his reputation for serene manners, and his apparent tranquility, despite his intellectual sparring in the rough and tumble New York literary community, made Trilling a perfect mentor for Chase.

In many ways, Chase was an ideal protégé for Trilling. The fact that Chase was only tangentially involved with the sectarian struggles of the left during the 1930s, and that he was not from the urban and Jewish background that was typical of most New

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<sup>20</sup> Richard Chase Journal Entry, Sept. 18, Box 4, Richard Chase Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

York intellectuals, was an advantage to Trilling. Chase presented Trilling with a *tabula rasa* on which he could record and perpetuate his own understanding of literature and politics. Indeed, while Trilling influenced countless numbers of Columbia University students and had a profound impact on the mid-century New York intellectual community, Chase came closest to being a genuine follower and proponent of what might be described as a Trilling school. Eventually the relationship between Chase and Trilling would sour. This interpersonal failure suggests not only the difficulties of an evolving mentor-student relationship, but also the limitations of Trilling's particular approach to criticism and politics. Nevertheless, while Chase was a graduate student, and until about the mid-fifties, he was a devoted and loyal a follower of Trilling.

What was especially appealing to Chase was the way in which Trilling seemed effortlessly to combine social, political, and psychological insights into his literary criticism. Chase wanted to follow Trilling's example and integrate the latest social scientific theory into his work. His dissertation was a study of the evolution of the study of myth and its incorporation in modern literature. Chase found that recent developments in the field of anthropology, especially those associated with the culture and personality school were very useful. As he described in his critique of Heard and Huxley, Chase saw a complex understanding of society and culture in the work of this group of anthropologists. By undermining the concept of the "primitive," it seemed to Chase that they were recognizing the role that the irrational has in all societies, even so-called "advanced" civilizations. It was also an approach that was particularly apropos for a Columbia graduate student. In the first decades of the twentieth century, the Columbia University anthropologist, Franz Boas, pioneered an approach to anthropology that

understood culture as complex interaction among, the individual, society, and the environment. By his definition, culture was an all-encompassing medium that reflected human creativity and sought to provide for both the material needs of the community and the psychological needs of the individual. The methodology that Boas created became associated with Columbia University, and especially with his student and later Columbia University professor, Ruth Benedict.

Given Chase's perception that literature was intimately connected to larger cultural and political issues, it was natural that he would be drawn toward an anthropology that had a dynamic and broad understanding of culture. Also given the nature of his topic, it made good academic sense for Chase to have an anthropologist on his dissertation committee. In the fall of 1945, he asked Ruth Benedict to join his committee. Chase asked her based on her general reputation as an anthropologist and not because of Benedict's recent work on myth. In fact, it seems that Chase was remarkably unfamiliar with her most recent work.<sup>21</sup> This was unfortunate and led to later misunderstandings. The relationship between the student and the anthropologist did not go well and, in the end, Benedict had to resign from Chase's committee. The incident, however, illustrates the limits to which Chase was willing to subordinate his literary criticism to social science. These limits suggest that as Chase wrote his dissertation, his understanding of culture became more restricted. And, finally, the break between Chase and Benedict demonstrates the profound influence that Trilling exerted over Chase during this period.

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<sup>21</sup> Judith Modell, "The Uncontrolled Role of the Human Imagination: a Selection of Letters, Richard Chase and Ruth Benedict, 1945-46," *American Studies* 23 (Fall, 1982), 49-64; Judith Schachter Modell, *Ruth Benedict: Patterns of a Life*, (Philadelphia, 1983), 244-246.

By January 1946, Benedict had read a draft of Chase's dissertation.<sup>22</sup> It was not what she expected. Benedict wrote to Chase and asked him to be "quietly dropped" from the committee. She told him that the dissertation was a fine study that "should get accepted and printed as nearly as possible as it now stands." However, Benedict felt that Chase did not focus enough on a specific tradition of myth. In her opinion, Chase did not appreciate that the "students" of myth that he wrote about had "set down comments on thousands and thousands of pages of primitive and civilized folklore." Benedict added, "Never having put yourself through this experience you don't know how boring it is and what miles away from your preoccupations are from theirs."<sup>23</sup> The anthropologist wanted Chase to pursue an ethnographic study, but she recognized that this was at this point impossible, and asked to be replaced. Of course, Chase was disappointed, but his reply to Benedict suggests something more than just disappointment. It suggests condescension. In a six-page letter, Chase enumerated in detail how Benedict's criticisms were wrong. What especially bothered him was that he thought that Benedict was "implying that the literary critic must consider the findings of anthropology inaccessible." He wrote, "It would indeed be sad if the students of art were unable to consult the students of man, as I am sure you will agree. ... A pious thought! [*sic*]." He further complained that "in effect," Benedict was reproaching him for not being an anthropologist.<sup>24</sup>

This is a rather audacious way for a graduate student to address a senior scholar, but Chase believed that there were important principles at stake. "There is obviously a deep methodological disagreement between the anthropologists and the students of

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<sup>22</sup> Modell, *Ruth Benedict: Patterns of a Life*, 244.

<sup>23</sup> Modell, "The Uncontrolled Role of the Human Imagination," 54.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*: 56-61.

literature,” Chase wrote. “You see myth as a cultural phenomenon. I see it as the aesthetic activity of a man’s mind.”<sup>25</sup> Chase was not simply delineating the boundaries between disciplines. He was asserting the importance of literary criticism and the role of literary critics as judges of culture, rather than simply chroniclers of it. Despite his initial enthusiasm for anthropology, Chase developed by this time a very different conception of culture than that of Benedict. It was a broad understanding, to be sure; but Chase’s idea of culture was not as all-encompassing as the anthropological conception of culture. Chase derived his understanding of culture from Trilling, who, in turn, based his understanding of culture on Matthew Arnold’s work. Arnold’s belief that culture was a process that was both rational and irrational was especially important to Trilling. Thus culture reflected the objective needs of a society as well as its irrational desires and fears. No anthropologist, certainly not one who considered herself a follower of Franz Boas, would find anything particularly objectionable with this definition of culture. However, Arnold also emphasized that culture reflected the conflict between the individual and society. Furthermore, he understood literature as the best way to express this persistent problem.<sup>26</sup> For Chase, then, myth was literature, and it was primarily concerned with the aesthetic expression of conflict between the individual and society, a more modern problem than a cultural anthropologist would pursue. Specific traditions of myth were not nearly as important to Chase as this general concept of myth as a form of literature, and, by implication, the idea that literature can be seen as a form of myth-making.

What upset Chase so much was that Benedict seemed to devalue literary criticism. He suspected that there was more to her disapproval than simply the natural

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Tanner, *Lionel Trilling*, 32-34.

predisposition that one has towards one's own discipline. Chase feared that Benedict was displaying a form of philistinism that was common among progressive-thinking intellectuals -- that is, that literature was a frivolous activity compared with work in the hard and social sciences. Trilling's influence can be seen throughout this incident. It appears that Chase's thoughts about the role of the critic in society crystallized during this period. Specifically, Chase adopted Trilling's position that superior literature could display knowledge as "real" as any produced by science, and, indeed, offered insights into the human condition that science could not provide.

In addition to the philosophical influence that he had over Chase, Trilling increased his academic importance to Chase at this time. Before Chase broke with Benedict, Trilling was not officially on Chase's dissertation committee. After the incident, Trilling, not only joined the committee, he became its chair and recommended to Chase who should replace Benedict. Trilling advised Chase throughout this exchange with Benedict. In fact, he reviewed the strongly worded letter sent by Chase to Benedict that delineated all of her errors. Trilling wrote to Chase that the letter was "a masterpiece," and complimented Chase, saying that he was writing "better and better."<sup>27</sup> Trilling was cultivating in Chase a discursive style that can only be described as aggressive and combative. It was a style that was more suited to the hyper-competitive world of New York intellectuals than the more sedate world of academia.

The exchange between Chase and Benedict also suggests the limits to which Trilling was willing to incorporate a modern sociological approach in literary criticism. While he insisted that literature had to be understood within a social context, he claimed a

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<sup>27</sup> Lionel Trilling to Richard Chase, 16 February 1946, Box 2, Richard Chase Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

special authority for it. His definition of culture sought to understand the whole of human experience, but it was still a definition of culture that privileged the artist and the concept of a high culture. As Trilling's student, Chase could not be concerned with ethnographic studies. Only individual artists and their creative interpretation of the dark aspects of human existence were important to the literary critic. All of this suggests that Trilling and Chase, while deploring the "failure of nerve" as much as Sidney Hook, nevertheless believed that the purely rational and scientific approach to social and political problems that was embodied by Hook's liberal empiricism and Benedict's strict sense of social scientific methodology was also deficient. Social science, while offering valuable insight, could not adequately address the irrational aspects of human nature. Chase, whose first public essays decried mysticism masquerading as science, nevertheless came to appreciate how individual artists could use myth to express a deeper understanding of life than science was incapable of doing.

This placed Trilling and Chase in opposition to some commonly accepted liberal ideas. Just as Trilling suggested in his 1940 article, "Elements That Are Wanted," that liberals could learn something from T.S. Eliot without adopting his unacceptable political stand, Chase found that a secular-minded intellectual could learn something from Toynbee.<sup>28</sup> Three years after he warned the readers of *Partisan Review* that Toynbee was another symptom of the failure of nerve, Chase described Toynbee as a "religious intellectual," who nevertheless was also an "heir to the Enlightenment," who insisted that its humanitarianism must not be abandoned "under any circumstances." In stark contrast to his earlier characterization of Toynbee, Chase argued that Toynbee's religious

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<sup>28</sup> Trilling, "Elements That Are Wanted," 367-379; Richard Chase, "Toynbee: The Historian As Artist," *The American Scholar* 16 (Summer, 1947): 268-282.

inspiration gave him insight that ordinary liberals lacked. While the toleration that emerged from the Enlightenment was surely a good thing, Chase believed it was “founded on a superficial psychology” that “did not see in Man either his abysmal depravity or the pinnacles of his exaltations” and therefore it could not “account for the extremes of human behavior.”<sup>29</sup>

Chase had reversed his position on Toynbee. Earlier, Chase understood the historian as an example of the failure to comprehend and depict the complexity of human history. Now, he argued that Toynbee “illustrated Freud’s ‘pleasure-principle’ in the images of myth and universal history” and that taken together, “the theories of Freud and Toynbee offer a full view of the neurotic impulse commonly called ‘escapism.’”<sup>30</sup> Chase understood that his liberal readers could not read about Toynbee’s ideas without “bridling more than once.”<sup>31</sup> Moreover, Chase’s enthusiasm for Toynbee did not blind him to the historian’s shortcomings. He admitted that Toynbee’s conception of the Catholic Church as the only a “Universal Church” capable of transcending “the suicidal barriers of nationalism” was, at the least, naïve.<sup>32</sup> Yet despite Toynbee’s naiveté regarding the reactionary potential for religion, as well as the factual errors that riddled his work, Chase insisted that *A Study of History* must be taken seriously. “Great and persuasive theorists – Marx, Freud, Toynbee -- do not, however,” Chase observed, “exert their strongest influence because of the logical air-tightness of their theories, but rather because they fill an unconsciously felt vacuum with the force and urgency of their moral passion.” Chase hoped that “liberals” would not focus on Toynbee’s superficial flaws and instead

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<sup>29</sup> Chase, “Toynbee: The Historian As Artist,” 268-269.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 277-278.

recognize how the historian's view could correct their own basic error – that is, “the refusal to understand the complexity and range of human personality.” “Toynbee has given us,” concluded Chase, “a new interpretation of the noblest concept of the Western mind: the idea that man's life is a tragedy. The impulse of the Liberal is to suppose that the tragic view of life has no utility, that it is in fact an encumbrance to all hopeful undertakings.”<sup>33</sup>

What accounted for Chase's reversal on Toynbee? Part of the answer to this question lies in the onset of the Cold War and the increasingly aggressive stance of anticommunist left. During World War II the anticommunist left concentrated on the “failure of nerve” exhibited by intellectuals, that is, their retreat from the pluralistic values of the Enlightenment and traditional liberalism for the certainties of either religiously inspired traditionalism or Stalinist totalitarianism. The anti-Stalinist *Partisan Review* circle, while publicly proclaiming its skepticism over the alliance between the Allies and the Soviet Union, did not push the issue. They were, overall, in favor of the war and recognized the unfortunate necessity of the alliance. Instead, for the most part their criticism was directed vaguely at the vulgarity and superficiality of “middlebrow” culture. They attacked the political and social naiveté and the poor aesthetic taste of the organs of middlebrow culture, which include a wide range of political opinion, from the publications of the Communist Party to established liberal journals of opinion, such as the *New Republic*, to the immensely popular magazines of the Luce organization. After the war, however, *Partisan Review*, and the anti-Stalinist intellectuals who were associated with it, began to concentrate their attacks on progressive-minded intellectuals who resisted the onset of the Cold War. The *Partisan Review* editorial, “The Liberal Fifth

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 281-282.

Column,” signaled the start of the Cold War among American intellectuals. This editorial, written just a year after the end of the war, attacked established New Deal politicians such as Eleanor Roosevelt and Florida senator Claude Pepper, as well the editors and publishers of the progressive journals *The New Republic*, *The Nation*, and *PM*, as traitors for their continued support of the Soviet Union.<sup>34</sup> By 1947, any pretence of a unified left had vanished. Anticommunist left-wing intellectuals openly attacked former friends and political allies, accusing them of appeasing Stalin. At the same time, anticommunist intellectuals who still considered themselves to be progressives found themselves in the uncomfortable position of forming alliances – by design and accident -- with those they once criticized as anti-liberal or reactionary.

However, anticommunism alone does not account for Chase’s reversal on Toynbee. After all, Chase was certainly an avowed anti-Stalinist when he first criticized Toynbee. Part of the reason why Chase reevaluated Toynbee was that he found the historian’s language irresistible. Even when he criticized Toynbee and accused him of being part of the “failure of nerve,” Chase admitted that Toynbee did occasionally achieve “a beautiful synthesis of history and mythology.”<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, Chase could not avoid using Toynbee’s ideas and language in his dissertation on myth and literature. While Toynbee’s concept of the “withdrawal and return” of civilizations may have been dubious as history, Chase found it to be an essential descriptive term when dealing with what he called the “Promethean” aspects of literature.<sup>36</sup>

Another factor that propelled Chase to revisit Toynbee was that, quite independent of Chase’s work, the historian suddenly enjoyed a burst of popularity during

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<sup>34</sup> William Barrett, "The 'Liberal' Fifth Column," *Partisan Review* 13 (Summer, 1946), 279-293.

<sup>35</sup> Chase, "History vs. The City of God," 54.

<sup>36</sup> Richard Chase, *Quest for Myth*, (Baton Rouge, La., 1949), 85-86.

the late 1940s. Toynbee, perhaps unwittingly, became part of the intellectual Cold War and, more significantly, the campaign to encourage the United States to institute a more active and interventionist foreign policy that could shape the post-war era. In 1947, an abridgement of the first six volumes of his *A Study of History* was published. Due in part to its promotion by Whittaker Chambers --who, at this time, was an extreme anticommunist, ideologically very conservative, and an editor at *Time* magazine -- the abridgement became a best seller. Chambers had been for some time using his position as a senior editor in the Luce organization to undermine sympathy for the Soviet Union and to promote his own grievances against liberalism.<sup>37</sup> In a *Time* magazine cover story, Chambers used Toynbee's work to support his contention that only a revival of traditional Christianity could prevent the collapse of Western civilization.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, Toynbee encouraged interest in his work when he came to the United States in early 1948 for a speaking tour and ostensibly to finish the last three volumes of *A Study of History*. When asked by reporters why his work suddenly enjoyed so much popularity, Toynbee replied that maybe it was "because America was entering the mainstream of history and Americans wanted to know more about it."<sup>39</sup> Beyond the Luce publications, which lionized the historian, the overall press coverage of Toynbee was flattering. Even *The Nation* gave the abridgement a favorable review.<sup>40</sup> Despite this enthusiasm, however, most liberals recognized that the current zeal for Toynbee was part of an

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<sup>37</sup> Even before the war ended, Chambers was alerting the readers of *Time* that Soviets could not be trusted and that their guarantees at Yalta were worthless. See Whittaker Chambers [unsigned], "The Ghosts on the Roof," *Time*, March 5, 1945, 36-37. Chambers also promoted an explicitly religious interpretation of contemporary problems. See, for example, Whittaker Chambers, "Sin Rediscovered," *Time*, March 24, 1941, 38-40; Whittaker Chambers, "The Middle Ages," *Life*, April 7, 1947, 67; Whittaker Chambers, "The Devil," *Life*, March 8, 1948, 76-85.

<sup>38</sup> Whittaker Chambers [unsigned], "The Challenge," *Time*, March 17, 1947, 71-81.

<sup>39</sup> "People," *Time*, March 1, 1948, 32.

<sup>40</sup> E.D. Myers, "The Shorter Toynbee," *The Nation*, April 19, 1947, 455-456.

orchestrated campaign against progressive ideals. Paul Radin expressed the typical frustration with Toynbee when he declared the theme of *A Study of History* was not potential the collapse of Western Civilization, but rather Toynbee's fear that his own elite class was in irreversible decline.<sup>41</sup>

It was in this context that Chase chose to defend Toynbee publicly. It was another example of the increasingly aggressive anticommunist left pointing out the deficiencies of liberalism, even if it meant a de facto alliance with avowed conservatives, such as Chambers. Chase chastised Radin for condemning Toynbee for elitism. This was merely a hackneyed progressive trope, according to Chase. "The historical catastrophe and vision of human tragedy which is Toynbee's subject matter," Chase wrote, "will not be shuffled off so easily." Although Toynbee had become "the official world-historian of the Luce publications" and Luce was an influence that was "dark and reactionary," liberals needed to recognize the complexity of Toynbee's vision, or else liberalism, stuck with its simplistic understanding of human existence, will be without "strategy and arms."<sup>42</sup>

Chase, thus, was following a larger trend by defending Toynbee. The critique of liberalism that Chase exemplified was typical of the period immediately after the war. At this time, a large group of intellectuals associated with the left, or formerly associated with the left, took to criticizing liberalism and defending aspects of conservative thought for its "complexity." However, the shift in Chase's opinion of Toynbee reflected more than simply another young intellectual who was following the crowd. In fact, Chase underwent an intellectual transformation during the period he was finishing his

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<sup>41</sup> Paul Radin, "Gentleman Historian," *The Kenyon Review* 9 (Autumn, 1947), 622-629.

<sup>42</sup> Richard Chase, "Radin on Toynbee," *The Kenyon Review* 10 (Winter, 1948), 141-142.

dissertation. Before 1945, Chase was to be sure a staunch anti-Stalinist. He was convinced that those intellectuals who remained part of the Communist Party -- or even those who simply avoided criticizing the party -- had sacrificed not only their political objectivity, but also their moral and aesthetic sensibilities. For example, in 1944 Chase chastised Eric Bentley for excusing George Bernard Shaw's admiration for Stalin and other dictators. Bentley was so offended by this that he was compelled to write to Chase and accused him and others who wrote for *Partisan Review*, and the Trotskyite *politics*, of trying to smear anyone who disagreed with them as philistines and moral reprobates.<sup>43</sup> Clearly, Chase had absorbed by the early forties the political sensibilities of the anti-Stalinist left. Nevertheless, sometime during the years 1945 and 1946, Chase's leftist anti-Stalinism was transformed into a more explicit, and philosophically more complex, anti-radicalism. And Lionel Trilling's influence was instrumental in this transformation.

From the spring of 1945 until the summer of 1946, Chase struggled to finish his dissertation and, at the same time, to secure his first professional appointment. This would be a difficult time for any aspiring academic and it seems that Chase was especially affected by the stress of this period. He suffered from apparent psychosomatic illnesses and seriously contemplated whether he could continue his career as a writer and critic, as well as teacher. In June 1945, Chase put aside his dissertation and tried to relax. He was only partly successful. His feelings of anxiety and physical exhaustion led Chase to consult a physician, who pronounced him physically fit albeit "high strung."<sup>44</sup> In spite of his health problems, Chase did manage to apply for a position at Connecticut College.

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<sup>43</sup> Bentley to Richard Chase, 6 November 1948? Box 1 - Catalogued Correspondence, Richard Chase Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University. The letter is incorrectly dated as from 1948, although it is clear from the content that it was written in 1944.

<sup>44</sup> Richard Chase to Francis Chase, Monday. [July 1945], Box 3a, Richard Chase Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

Almost immediately, the college offered him the job. The head of the English department was quite agreeable to Chase's desire to be seen as a literary critic rather than simply another chronicler of textual histories. At the time, the Connecticut College English department was dominated by the old-fashioned bibliographic approach to literature, and Chase was seen as a youthful representative of the new critical methodology.<sup>45</sup> However, Chase was reluctant to take on the responsibilities of teaching. He vacillated back and forth about whether to teach at Connecticut College the following year. In early August 1945, Chase, agreeing with his mentor's advice that taking some time off and doing nothing would be a bad idea, Chase decided to accept the position.<sup>46</sup> Yet only a week later Chase informed Trilling that he had made the decision not to teach and that, instead, he and his wife were going to spend the winter in Maine rather than Connecticut.<sup>47</sup> Ultimately, Chase did stay in Connecticut, but the months that followed were filled with difficulties. Throughout the fall, Chase made the final revisions to his dissertation and sent it to his committee members. It was at this point that the disagreement with Ruth Benedict occurred. Despite the angry exchange with Benedict and the complications that came with rearranging his committee, Chase managed to complete the dissertation, and he received his Ph.D. by the summer of 1946.

The year he completed his dissertation was a formative experience for Chase. He explained to Trilling that while he was suffering from "nervousness and irritability," he also felt sense of excitement. "I cannot remember," Chase wrote to Trilling, "ever having

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<sup>45</sup> Richard Chase to Lionel Trilling, Aug. 13, 1945, Box 2, Lionel Trilling Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Richard Chase to Lionel Trilling, August 21 [1945], Box 2, Lionel Trilling Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

been so conscious of change and motion within. It is exhilarating.”<sup>48</sup> Chase looked to Trilling for not only academic and professional advice, but also for personal inspiration. In June, when his exhaustion had reached a high enough point to force Chase to visit a doctor, he turned to Trilling’s biography of E. M. Forester for insight into his own plight as an intellectual.<sup>49</sup> At the time, Chase was plagued with severe doubts about his ability to perform. He saw himself as a “Babbitt in intellectual’s clothing” and as someone who up until this point in his life had only experienced life in the most superficial way. He believed that his quest for success and recognition had led him to engage in “dishonest synthesis” and that he had “cheated” the authors of the books he read, the people he had written about in his essays, his students and, most sadly, his wife. Chase considered the possibility that he ought to stop writing for some time, five years, or “maybe for ever.”<sup>50</sup> He saw a parallel between his own feelings of despair over the way in which his life seemed dominated by the quest for status and recognition and the sense of “panic and emptiness” that overwhelmed the class-conscious characters of E.M. Forster’s stories.<sup>51</sup> Chase understood Forster’s solution to this problem to be a political and ideological lesson. “His formula for the decent life,” wrote Chase about Forster, “is a reformed liberalism – i.e. liberalism which has learned to free itself from the structures of its principles and dogmas whenever they interfere with one’s grasping hold of life or with one’s understanding of people as people – liberalism which sees the values of stabilities, richnesses, venerablenesses [*sic*].”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Richard Chase to Lionel Trilling, Feb. 2 [1946], Box 2, Lionel Trilling Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Richard Chase to Francis Chase, Monday. [July 1945].

<sup>51</sup> Ibid; Richard Chase to Lionel Trilling, Feb. 2 [1946].

<sup>52</sup> Richard Chase to Francis Chase, Monday. [July 1945].

This was not so much Forster's view as it was Trilling's view. Chase understood this. He explained to his wife that "Trilling is right as usual," while Dwight Macdonald and the editors of *Partisan Review* were "wrong – or at least inadequate," and Forster, while "good," was "only a hinter."<sup>53</sup> Chase drew upon Trilling's book, *E.M. Forster* (1943) when he described his own feelings of "panic and emptiness." Trilling was specifically referring to a scene in *Howard's End* when one character suddenly experiences a sense of terror while she listens to Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.<sup>54</sup> He recognized that this sense of "panic and emptiness" was a recurring theme in Forster's work. In Forster's stories, there is a point at which Forster's characters suddenly face moments of existential terror that shake their preconceived conceptions and challenge their comfortable bourgeois existence. More often than not, the characters fail fully to appreciate their sense of emptiness and retreat back to the certainties and prejudices of their small and highly structured lives. Yet Trilling understood even this failure on the part of these characters as further evidence of Forster's realistic moral vision. Although Forster was not a "realistic" writer in the commonly accepted sense of the term, Trilling believed that his stories demonstrated something more than simply an "awareness of morality." They were concerned foremost with "the contradictions, paradoxes and dangers of living a moral life."<sup>55</sup> Forster, then, understood how good and evil were intertwined with one another. Trilling observed that this understanding of good and evil was difficult for the "literal and liberal intelligence" to accept. For Trilling, however, the complications of a moral life, was the essential truth that he sought from superior literature. According to Trilling, the political implication of this moral complexity was

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Lionel Trilling, *E. M. Forster*, (Norfolk, Conn., 1943), 130-131.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 11-12.

that political attachment had to be always limited. Because no cause, or ideology, could avoid an involvement with evil, as well as good, one's commitment to political action had to be carefully measured. This is not to say that political quietism was the best course. Trilling believed that a sense of social responsibility required political involvement, but he also believed that while involvement in politics was necessary, it must not be allowed to overwhelm the personality. The politically committed individual had to preserve the aloofness that came with the mature realization of the moral complexities of life. The failure to do this resulted in a personality that became lost in ideology – lost, in other words, in an illusion. Trilling argued that political radicalism was the product of the failure to keep a part of the personality unaffected by ideology. Radicalism was for Trilling an immature exercise in wishful thinking.

During the difficult period while Chase was completing his doctorate, an ironic transposition occurred. Trilling thought that political radicalism was an expression of immaturity and psychological maladjustment. Chase seems to have reversed Trilling's formula, by supposing that personal psychological problems were a reflection of a poor political outlook. In a "brief self-analysis" contained in a remarkable letter to his wife, Frances, written in the summer of 1945, Chase seemed to suggest that by adopting the proper political outlook – the "reformed liberalism" that he associated with Forster and Trilling – he could cure his own psychological problems, specifically his own debilitating sense of "panic and emptiness."<sup>56</sup> From this point on Chase was more than just another New York intellectual who had been influenced by Trilling. He became truly a disciple of Trilling and an ardent promoter of Trilling's particular brand of anti-radical

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<sup>56</sup> Richard Chase to Lionel Trilling, Nov. 16 [1945], Box 2, Lionel Trilling Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

modernism. Despite his transposition of aspects of Trilling's beliefs, Chase fully absorbed the basic tenet of Trilling's anti-radicalism: ideological and political radicalism, and indeed, most forms of alienation, were products of an individual's lack of psychological self-awareness and maturity. For Chase, this anti-radical modernism became something of a creed that guided not only his politics but his criticism and scholarship as well. Anti-radical modernism was the lens through which he viewed literature and art.

This is not to say that Chase was merely parroting Trilling. Chase had his own distinct interests, and there were stylistic and methodological differences between his criticism and Trilling's work. One difference between Chase and Trilling was the subject matter that interested them. Chase was primarily interested in American literature of the first half of the nineteenth century, especially the work of the New England authors who F.O. Matthiessen described as part of the "American Renaissance." While chronologically speaking Trilling and Chase had similar interests (Trilling was concerned with British authors from the same period), there were nonetheless important differences in how each man approached his material. Given his subject matter, Chase could not help but be part of the emerging American Studies movement. In keeping with the concerns of American Studies, he employed an interdisciplinary approach to discern the unique aspects and origins of American culture. Trilling, although he was certainly partial to Anglo-Saxon culture, was less interested in the specifically American aspects of contemporary culture and instead was inclined to seek universal themes in his work. Another difference between Chase and Trilling was that Chase employed myth criticism (also known as the myth and symbol method) in his work. This method sought to discern archetypal themes and symbols within a body of literature. It was a popular approach in

the field of American Studies and would reach an apex during the 1950s with such works as Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950) and R.W.B. Lewis's *The American Adam* (1955). While Trilling was certainly concerned with the depiction of universal psychological themes in literature, he never expressed much interest in the mythical symbolism that preoccupied American Studies scholars in the immediate post-war era.

However, the disciplinary differences between Chase and Trilling should not be overemphasized. In 1946, American Studies was still at a nascent stage of development; The American Studies Association would not be founded until 1950. Furthermore, Chase was also at an early stage of his intellectual development. Although his work clearly fell within the purview of the American Studies movement, Chase identified himself as primarily a literary critic whose interests just happened to be American authors. In addition, Trilling's main targets – the progressive critics and the formalism of the New Criticism – were also Chase's *bêtes noires*. Like many early American Studies scholars, Chase believed that it was necessary to move beyond the simplistic progressive history of Parrington and illustrate the complex and often morally ambiguous origins of American culture. At the same time, the formalism of the New Critics was unsuitable for an interdisciplinary American Studies, since it tended to divorce literature from its historical, as well as political, context. In the late forties, therefore, there was a strong convergence in Trilling's approach to literature and Chase's scholarly interests. In time, though, differences would lead to a dramatic divergence not only in their scholarly interests, but also in their political and cultural outlooks. Chase's search for the unique aspects and

origins of American culture, as well as his concern with contemporary American culture, would eventually lead him to break with Trilling.

This disagreement, however, would not come for many years. For the moment, the differences between Chase and Trilling were not especially noticeable or significant. And Trilling's influence on Chase was profound. Even when he dealt with topics that did not directly interest Trilling, Chase was always sure to pay homage to his mentor. A good example of this is found in Chase's first book, *Quest for Myth* (1949), which was a revised version of his dissertation. The book was both a survey of how myth has been conceptualized by Western intellectuals from the Middle Ages to the present and a critical evaluation of the use of myth in contemporary literature. Although the topic of myth was never directly addressed by Trilling, *Quest for Myth* incorporated many of the themes of his work. One example of this is the way in which Chase portrayed Romanticism as a necessary corrective of the Enlightenment. He described two figures of what Isaiah Berlin would later call the counter-Enlightenment, Giambattista Vico and Johann Gottfried Herder, as instrumental in recognizing myths as something more than simply the superstitions of "primitive" people, as Enlightenment theorists maintained.<sup>57</sup> Chase understood Vico and Herder as having a broader understanding of human culture than any of the *philosophes*. Instead of dismissing myth as a product of fear and ignorance, Vico and Herder understood that myth was an expression of the human sense of "awe and wonder." Together they loosened "the intellectual prejudice" of the

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<sup>57</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder*, (Princeton, 2000), 40-41; Chase, *Quest for Myth*, 22-37.

Enlightenment and paved the way for what Chase called “a pragmatic” theory of myth and the cultural relativism of modern anthropology.<sup>58</sup>

For Chase, Vico and Herder were harbingers of the Romantic sensibility that Trilling saw as adding a necessary counterpoint to the rationalist interpretation of human existence. This is not to say that Chase believed that the relationship between Romanticism and the Enlightenment was naturally antagonistic. Instead, like his mentor, Chase believed that the relationship was fundamentally dialectical in nature and that Freud was as near as possible to a perfect synthesis of Enlightenment reason with the Romantic depiction of human irrationality. “In the eighteenth century,” Chase quoted Trilling, “Vico had spoken of the metaphorical imagistic language of the earliest stages of culture; it was left to Freud to discover how, in a scientific age, the life of emotions is lived by figurative formations, and to create, what psychoanalysis is, a science of troops, of metaphor.” Indeed, as Chase noted, Trilling believed that Freud’s psychology proved that the human mind is “in the greater part of its tendency, exactly a poetry making organ.” It was also, Chase added, “a myth making organ.”<sup>59</sup>

Chase cautioned his readers that one should not be too doctrinaire in applying Freudian analysis to the study of myth. Just as Trilling warned in his essay, “Freud and Literature,” that a strict application of Freud’s theories to the study of art often led to what can only be described as a “contemptuous” and dismissive attitude to art as a mere “substitute gratification,” Chase feared that an overly enthusiastic Freudian would confuse myth with dreams and thereby reduce myth to a morass of hidden sexual

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<sup>58</sup> Chase, *Quest for Myth*, 32-36.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

symbolism.<sup>60</sup> In contrast, Chase saw myth as an aesthetic expression of the unconscious. “Myth is,” he insisted, “an aesthetic device for bringing the imaginary but powerful world of preternatural forces into a manageable collaboration with the objective facts of life in such away as to excite a sense of reality amenable to both the unconscious passions and the conscious mind.”<sup>61</sup>

This conceptualization of myth came straight from Trilling’s interpretation of Freud. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud attempted to explain why so many of his patients experienced recurring dreams of horrific moments in their lives. This contradicted his earlier formulation that dreams were exercises in wish-fulfillment. Freud’s answer was that there was a “repetition compulsion” to relive these difficult experiences in an attempt to establish psychological mastery over them. For Trilling, this “repetition-compulsion” had significant implications for art. He believed that in it lay the impetus for the creative depiction of tragedy.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, Trilling understood literature as the conscious exploration of the dark unconscious, and the purpose of literature was to illuminate the tragedy inherent in life, and thereby, perhaps, gain a measure of control – or, at least, understanding -- over it. For all of his criticism of the Enlightenment, Trilling -- like Freud -- was still fundamentally committed to the Enlightenment project of understanding and control. Romanticism, which was best expressed through literature, was for Trilling, simply another means to these Enlightenment inspired goals.

Although a discussion of the study of ancient and folk myths occupied a great deal of *Quest for Myth*, Chase’s primary concern was the implications and applications of myth to modern literature. The purpose of his study was to discern a method of

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<sup>60</sup> Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, 33-55; Chase, *Quest for Myth*, 90-96.

<sup>61</sup> Chase, *Quest for Myth*, 97.

<sup>62</sup> Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, 51-52.

expression that could enable the modern writer adequately to address the human condition in an age in which faith in traditional values had been lost and the rationalist ideologies of modernity had been discredited. Chase believed that a “mythic” approach to literature could provide a suitable method of expression. He pointed to the work of Henry James as an outstanding example of how myth, or as he put “mythicizing,” was best expressed in the modern age. Chase explained,

Surely our argument has led us to one of the crucial problems of modern art and modern culture. We have been made, singly and in private, the trustees of inhumanly powerful forces which were once caged and domesticated by the apparatus of the Christian religion. Henry James, who in company with his father and brother was forced by temperament to confront the undisciplined terrors of his own unconsciousness, examined our problem with tenacious care. The ghosts which haunt certain of his characters, such as the governess in *The Turn of the Screw* and the too scrupulous gentlemen epitomized in *The Beast in the Jungle*, are terrible and destructive just because they are inadequately projected by their victims. In contrast to the mythical beings they might and should become, they remain uncreated. They remain secret and internal, appearing outwardly only in uncontrollable hallucinations which demoralize their victims. As Philip Rahv says, these figures of James’s stories “forfeit their allotted share of experience through excessive pride or delicacy or rationality.” Pride, delicacy, and rationality – perhaps this is a good formulation of the scruples which keep us from mythicizing “the beast.” We must do with “the beast” what James himself did: flush it from the jungle so that it may be captured in the texture of aesthetic experience and bent to our will.<sup>63</sup>

Chase’s use of James as an example of excellent mythic sensibility in modern literature was significant. Like much of *Quest for Myth*, it reflected Trilling’s influence, who described James as one of those writers he admired for the “moral realism” contained in their work.<sup>64</sup> But who Chase picked as a poor demonstration of the use of myth in modern literature was even more telling. While *Quest for Myth* was in many ways a polemic against hyper-rationalist liberals who considered themselves heirs to the Enlightenment, its main target was very anti-liberal T.S. Eliot. As Chase noted in the

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<sup>63</sup> Chase, *Quest for Myth*, 102.

<sup>64</sup> See Lionel Trilling “The Princess Casamassima,” in Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, 56-88.

forward, Eliot had, some twenty years earlier, praised the “mythical method” as making “art possible for the modern world.”<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, Eliot’s own work was suffused with mythic images and themes. Chase, however, did not think highly of the way Eliot employed myth in his work. “Eliot appears to think,” Chase explained, “that myth is a kind of ready-made construct which gives guidance to our understanding of life. I think that myth is something dynamic and that it depends upon art rather than vice versa – that in fact it *is* art.”<sup>66</sup>

Superficially, it may appear that Chase was making a small semantic point. However, he was strongly separating his position from that of Eliot. Chase recoiled from Eliot’s understanding of myth as a coherent “tradition.” He saw in both the “Southern School” (that is, the group of critics associated with John Crowe Ransom) and the followers of T.S. Eliot – the two groups, Chase noted, were not always separable – a tendency to identify myth with dogma. “A myth or a mythology, or so we are told,” wrote Chase explaining the thought of these schools of criticism, “is what modern culture needs because, having lost the guidance of the Christian dogma, we wander at large in the chaos of science and secularism.” This point of view was unacceptable to Chase. For all his criticism of modern and liberal sensibilities, he could not agree to the idea that what was needed was “a new myth, or new version of the old,” to “support and guide our work.”<sup>67</sup> Chase was impressed by the ability of myths to illustrate the dark and tragic, aspects of life. He understood myth – or the “mythic method” -- to be an antidote to the naïve optimism of the liberal or progressive outlook that characterized American thought in the first decades of the twentieth century. It was especially needed to challenge the

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<sup>65</sup> Chase, *Quest for Myth*, v.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 109-110.

progressive faith in the inherent reasonableness of the world and in humanity's ultimate goodness. Nevertheless, Chase was not about to abandon the liberal position completely. For all his criticism of modernity, he knew that the past could not be recreated, as Eliot seemed to suggest. After all, there was a reason why both Trilling and Chase constantly insisted, throughout their careers, that they were fundamentally liberals. Unlike Eliot and, at times, the New Critics, Trilling and Chase accepted modernity. Furthermore, they believed that the purpose of literature was not to counteract, or resist, or even escape modernity but rather to help understand it. In short, Trilling and Chase believed that Eliot's aesthetic remedy for modernity, while illuminating, nevertheless went too far – it was in a sense too radical.

Chase concluded that the modern age needed a modern conception of myth. Myth must be seen as a mutable style and form that is shaped by the circumstances of its use. This definition of myth was extrapolated by Chase from anthropology's understanding of culture as mutable and unique to particular social and environmental situation. Yet Chase did not reduce myth to a mere byproduct of culture. He insisted that that it was fundamentally an aesthetic creation of individual artists, who used a poetical-mythical perspective to give society insight into those tragic elements of life and the deeply rooted, sometimes unconscious, fears that all humans share, and that progressives tend to ignore. At the same time, however, he was still committed enough to basic progressive principles to recognize that T.S. Eliot's belief that modern literature ought to be fitted within a framework of a specific mythology ignored the realities of the modern world and, if strictly applied, would ultimately stifle creativity.

Chase's conceptualization of myth mirrored Trilling's understanding of literature. Indeed, as far as Chase was concerned in *Quest for Myth*, myth and literature are interchangeable terms. Therefore, despite the fact that his dissertation was ostensibly about a subject that Trilling never directly addressed, *Quest for Myth* was a polemical defense of Trilling's views of literature, literary criticism, and politics. In his book, Chase reiterated Trilling's basic critique of liberalism as fundamentally naïve and incapable of adequately recognizing and dealing with the most difficult aspects of human existence. To correct this deficiency, Chase, again echoing Trilling, called for a general reevaluation of the irrational characteristics of Romantic thought. But Chase and Trilling's anti-radicalism was not only aimed toward the political thought of the left. It was also directed against those whose critique of modernity was based on an idealization of the past. Thus, what were from the perspective of the New York critics the reactionary T.S. Eliot and the potentially conservative New Critics were as much targets of the Trilling/Chase polemic as any credulous liberal or narrow-minded Stalinist. This centrist positioning is more than simply a rhetorical ploy on the part of Trilling and Chase. The essence of their anti-radical modernism was that it was a measured defense of modernity. This defense was not only directed against a potentially totalitarian utopianism, it was also directed against those critics of modernity who sought to escape or ignore the realities and necessities of modern civilization by retreating into a closed philosophical system based on idealized notions of the past and the role of the artist. Although Trilling and Chase believed that the former presented a greater and more immediate political threat as the Cold War emerged, the professional rivalry with the latter – in particular, the New Critics – while not nearly as rancorous as their political battle with the left, was

nonetheless an essential part of their overall program to shape post-war American intellectual sensibilities.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The New Critics

During the early to mid-thirties -- at about the same time that that the *Partisan Review* circle was forming -- the New Critics made their earliest appearance as a discrete group of writers with a distinctive literary and political outlook.<sup>1</sup> The term “New Critics” came from John Crowe Ransom’s 1941 book, *The New Criticism*.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, the New Critics were those writers and critics personally and professionally associated with Ransom and the literary journal that he edited, *The Kenyon Review*. More generally, the New Criticism referred to a style of criticism that emerged during the interwar period that emphasized the structure, form, and techniques of literature (in particular, poetry) over the content and context of a work. In *The New Criticism*, Ransom illustrated this approach by analyzing the work of several prominent critics, who he described as practitioners of the “new criticism,” including I.A. Richards, William Empson, and T.S. Eliot.<sup>3</sup> Ransom also described his own ideal of criticism, the so-called ontological approach, which was characterized by a close reading of the text and detailed analysis of form. This formalism distinguished the New Critics from their New York counterparts.

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<sup>1</sup> Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*, 152-161; David R. Shumway, *Creating American Civilization: A Genealogy of American Literature as an Academic Discipline*, (Minneapolis, 1994), 221-260.

<sup>2</sup> John Crowe Ransom, *The New Criticism*, (Norfolk, Conn., 1941).

<sup>3</sup> Ransom also includes Yvor Winters as a practitioner of the New Criticism. However, Winters’ hostility to most modern literature was extraordinarily atypical of the New Critics. Ransom used Winters as an ironic demonstration of “logical” or structural criticism. Winters argued that the structure of modern literature, especially *vers libre*, damaged language, rendering it incapable of moral judgment. While Ransom disagreed with Winters’ conclusions, he appreciated the structural analysis that supported Winters’ moralism. See *Ibid.*, 211-275.

In retrospect, the methodological differences between the two groups were not as great as it was often portrayed at the time. The New Critics were never as strictly formalistic in practice as they were in theory and, in fact, they never completely ignored the content and context of literature.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the inherent intellectual eclecticism of the so-called New York critics, including Lionel Trilling, meant that their work often employed formalistic analysis and, certainly, aesthetic criticism. Despite this eventual methodological convergence, when Ransom and the circle of writers associated with him first published their criticism, it contained a radically conservative polemic that was diametrically at odds with the Marxist background of most New York intellectuals. Given their extreme ideological differences, it seemed that the political rivalry between the New Critics and their New York counterparts might be as intense as the sectarian conflict that divided the left during the same period.

The New Criticism developed in the late twenties and early thirties as a reaction against the stale scholastic historicism that dominated the academic study of literature in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The earlier method focused on bibliographic and textual histories that traced the “origins” of literature. At its worse, this method dealt with classic works of literature superficially, often attaching racial significance to them, while devaluing recent literature, especially works that could be characterized as modern or avant-garde. The New Critics were also reacting against what they described as “moralistic criticism” that judged a literary work by its salutary affect on society. This type of criticism came from two groups. The older more established

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<sup>4</sup> William Cain notes that the New Critics actually rarely employed their idealized form of a close reading. William E. Cain, *F.O. Matthiessen and the Politics of Criticism*, (Madison, Wisconsin, 1988), 26-27. Also see Shumway, *Creating American Civilization: A Genealogy of American Literature as an Academic Discipline*, 222.

group was the New Humanists, characterized by the work of critics such as Irving Babbitt, Paul Elmer More, and Norman Foerster. These critics had a general conservative outlook and valued literature for its ability to promote the great ideas of ethics and philosophy.<sup>5</sup> The other group was Marxist critics who evaluated a work based on its political utility. Although V.L. Parrington was not a Marxist himself, his work, *The Main Currents in American Thought* (1927-1930), which judged literature by its contribution to the advancement of democracy, exerted a tremendous influence on American Marxist critics and became the paradigm for Marxist, or “sociological,” criticism.

The ideas underlying the aesthetic criticism of the New Critics go back to the late nineteenth century when on both sides of the Atlantic scholars, critics, and writers conceptualized the aesthetic formalism that would become associated with modernism. In the United States, Renaissance scholar Joel E. Springarn was one of the earliest proponents of the close reading of text. Responding to the ascendancy of the New Humanists during the First World War, Springarn argued in *Creative Criticism* (1917) that literary texts must be regarded on their own terms and their “excellence must be judged by their own standard, without reference to ethics.”<sup>6</sup> For Springarn, who was politically liberal and notoriously anti-establishment, this formalistic approach liberated literary studies from the Victorian moralizing of the New Humanists while providing an aesthetic-based critical framework that the academic bibliographic approach lacked. However, while Springarn contributed to the advancement of the critical approach in the

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<sup>5</sup> Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*, 127-129; Shumway, *Creating American Civilization: A Genealogy of American Literature as an Academic Discipline*, 144-147.

<sup>6</sup> Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*, 127.

university, it was T.S Eliot, more than anyone else, who exerted the most influence upon the New Critics.<sup>7</sup>

With the publication of his collection of critical essays, *The Sacred Wood* in 1920, Eliot established himself as a major proponent of aesthetic criticism.<sup>8</sup> Like Springarn, he argued that a piece of literature must be regarded independently of its social context and even independent of its author. For Eliot, a poem had a separate and distinct existence apart from the author. “The poet has, not a ‘personality’ to express,” he declared, “but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways. Impressions and experiences which are important for the man may take no place in the poetry, and those which become important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in the man.”<sup>9</sup> Yet unlike Springarn, who was anxious to rebuke the historicism of academia, Eliot did not ignore the role that history played in the creative process. This is not to say that he was defending bibliographic scholasticism. Eliot had something entirely different in mind. In one of his earliest critical essays, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), Eliot not only asserted that a poem was autonomous and separate from its author, but that it was also connected with all the poems in the “tradition” that came before it. This was not simply a matter of the poet emulating historical forms and themes; it was an almost mystical process. “What happens when a new work of art is created,” Eliot insisted, “is something that happens simultaneously to all the work which preceded it.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> On Eliot as influence on New Critics, see Bradbury and Ruland, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism*, 349-351; Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*, 204-205; Shumway, *Creating American Civilization: A Genealogy of American Literature as an Academic Discipline*, 236.

<sup>8</sup> T.S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, (London, 1928).

<sup>9</sup> Frank Kermode, ed., *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, (New York, 1975), 42.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

Eliot thought of tradition as a living thing. He explained that a literary tradition was not merely a “collection of the writings of individuals,” but rather a set of “organic wholes” that acted as “systems in relation” to individual works of art and gave these works, and the artists that created them, their significance.<sup>11</sup> Eliot’s masterpiece, *The Wasteland* (1922), embodied his conception of tradition as a trans-historical phenomenon. The poem incorporated an eclectic mix of literary references from many different cultures, spanning thousands of years, and combined them with symbolic imagery of a decaying modern civilization. The overall effect of Eliot’s writings – both his prose and his verse – was the encouragement of poetry and criticism that demanded objective aesthetic standards, highly developed technique, and a learned background. There was, if not an explicit political message, a definite sociological outlook behind this approach. In the early twenties, Eliot was not expressing a particular ideology, but he was stating his profound alienation from modernity. His expression of disillusionment, dislocation, and frustration struck a cord with alienated intellectuals on both the left and the right. Tradition was partly a means of escaping the confines of modern civilization. More importantly, however, Eliot’s conception of a tradition in which the knowledge and the poetry of the past interacted with the artistic creation of the present was a way of conveying the overwhelming and confusing barrage of information and sensation that characterized and distinguished the experience of modernity from the more ordered past.

By the end of the decade, Eliot had moved from merely expressing his alienation with modernity to using his criticism and poetry to promote what he understood as the only viable alternative to modern industrial civilization -- a Christian traditionalism best exemplified by the culture of the High Middle Ages. As he did this, he moved away

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 68.

from his purely aesthetic conception of criticism. “In ages like our own,” Eliot wrote in 1935, “in which there is no such common agreement [on theological and ethical matters], it is the more necessary for Christian readers to scrutinize their reading, especially of the works of imagination, with explicit ethical and theological standards.”<sup>12</sup> Eliot still insisted that rigorous aesthetic standards were needed to determine if a work was worthy of being described as literature to begin with; but when it came to determining literary “greatness,” aesthetic standards alone would not suffice. The problem was that the modern artist was “corrupted” by what Eliot called “Secularism,” and therefore could not understand “the primacy of the supernatural over the natural life.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, modern literature could only incorporate a shallow materialistic understanding of the world and promote a limited moral view. “It is not that modern literature is in the ordinary sense ‘immoral’ or even ‘amoral,’” explained Eliot. “It is simply that it repudiates, or is wholly ignorant of our most fundamental and important beliefs; and that in consequence its tendency is to encourage its readers to get what they can out of life while it lasts, to miss no ‘experience’ that presents itself, and to sacrifice themselves, if they make any sacrifices at all, only for the sake of tangible benefits to others in this world either now or in the future.”<sup>14</sup> By the end of the decade, Eliot moved well beyond simply using Christian values to evaluate literature. With the secular liberal democracies of the West in economic crisis and under the increasing pressure of totalitarianism, Eliot called for a return to a “Christian Society.”<sup>15</sup> He envisioned this society as a hierarchically organized and culturally homogenous community that was guided by an absolute moral ideal. It

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 104-105.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>15</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture: The Idea of a Christian Society and Notes Toward the Definition of Culture*, (New York, 1949).

would be free of not only the cultural confusion caused by industrialism and modern society's endless quest to dominate nature, but also modernity's physical ugliness as well. The Christian Society was a beautiful place, in every sense of the word.<sup>16</sup>

The aesthetic criticism that Eliot promoted in the early twenties was not intrinsically conservative. If anything, it could be best described as apolitical. The separation of the text from its sociological context, and its author, made non-aesthetic value judgments superfluous. Even Eliot's early conception of tradition was not inherently conservative. While it certainly reflected a conservative temperament, from a purely philosophical perspective Eliot's conception of the "organic wholeness" of tradition and the interaction between the past and the present de-historicized literature and made it difficult to denounce the avant-garde for creatively violating dead artistic conventions, as well as teleologically privileging the present or the future. Of course, a non-ideological and apolitical methodology could be used in an ideological manner and, from his earliest writings, Eliot certainly understood his aesthetic criticism as a way to refute and counter the superficially liberal and shallow progressive ethos that guided the sensibilities of the British and American middle class. But aesthetic criticism could also be used against forces that were more conservative, as Springarn used it against the New Humanists and the academic establishment. In other words, there was no logical necessity, or inevitability, for the aesthetic criticism utilized by the New Critics to be associated with a right-wing critique of modernity.

Nevertheless, even though Eliot moved away from a pure aesthetic criticism as he became more ideologically explicit, his influence created an impression that aesthetic criticism expressed a particularly conservative rejection of modernity. This impression

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<sup>16</sup> T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy*, (London, 1934).

was reinforced by the earliest publications of some of the American critics who later became associated with the New Criticism. John Crowe Ransom and many of the future New Critics achieved their first national notoriety with the publication of *I'll Take My Stand* (1930). While most of the essays in the book did not directly address literary criticism, the political polemic of the entire project echoed many of Eliot's themes, especially with regard to the concept of tradition.

*I'll Take My Stand* was produced by a circle of intellectuals centered on Vanderbilt University known as "The Fugitives." The group began as a small discussion group of students and a local— but well traveled — Nashville eccentric intellectual, Sidney Miron Hirsh. When a young Vanderbilt instructor, John Crowe Ransom, joined the informal meetings in 1915, "The Fugitives" began to coalesce as a group. The name of the group came from the little literary magazine, *The Fugitives*, which they published from 1921 until 1925. Not long after Ransom joined the group, he and other members began to exchange poems and to criticize each other's work. After a few years of this informal writing and criticism, it occurred to them that they ought to publish the fair number of poems that they had accumulated. With the financial help of Hirsh's brother-in-law, James Marshall Frank, the magazine, although strictly locally circulated, became an outlet and training ground for many of the writers that would become associated with the New Critics.<sup>17</sup> In addition to Ransom, Allen Tate was a prominent member of the group. So were Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks, whose 1937 textbook, *Understanding Poetry*, became the standard for college instruction for the next two decades.

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<sup>17</sup> John L. Stewart, *The Burden of Time: The Fugitives and Agrarians*, (Princeton, New Jersey, 1965), 3-31.

Originally, the Fugitives, both the group and the magazine, were strictly concerned with literary and philosophical matters. They were by design a group of impractical intellectuals concerned with mainly esoteric subjects. However, when the nation's attention suddenly focused upon the South, and Tennessee in particular, during the Scopes "monkey-trial" in 1925, the Fugitive's Southern nationalism was aroused. They, like many southerners, found the coverage of the trial in the northern press to be one-sided and insulting. They were especially hurt by H.L. Mencken's characterization of the South as a cultural and intellectual desert. It was out of this sense of frustration and anger, and perhaps subconsciously shame as well, that the Fugitives developed the political philosophy known as Agrarianism. Agrarianism became more than just a defense of southern regionalism. It was a pointed critique of modernity, and in *I'll Take My Stand*, Agrarianism was presented as a viable alternative to industrialism.

For the authors of *I'll Take My Stand*, industrialism meant more than simply factories. They understood it as a fundamental transformation of the structures and values of a society. According to the Agrarians, the rationalization of society that industrialism demanded was a catastrophe. Specially, they saw the values of science as a new orthodoxy that tolerated no dissent and when combined with commercial interests obliterated any remnant of pre-industrial culture. "The capitalization of the applied sciences," argued the Agrarians, "has become extravagant and uncritical; it has enslaved our human energies to a degree now clearly felt burdensome."<sup>18</sup> They pointed out that industrialization's promise of labor-saving devices and a leisure-filled life had not come to pass. Indeed, modern society seemed more frantic, difficult, and precarious than ever.

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<sup>18</sup> Twelve Southerners, *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, (New York, 1962), xxi-xxii.

The Agrarians had a long list of the cultural casualties of modernity. The quality of religion, art, manners, conversation, hospitality, sympathy, family life, and even romantic love, deteriorated, or they were made completely impossible, in the “strictly-business or industrial civilization.”<sup>19</sup>

The Agrarians were describing what Marx called alienation – the social dislocation and isolation of the individual caused by capitalism. Their description of the dehumanizing effects of industrialization closely resembled the critique of capitalism that left-leaning intellectuals were making at the same time.<sup>20</sup> However, while the Agrarians and progressive or Marxist intellectuals agreed on the disease, they vehemently disagreed on the cure. The Agrarians denounced “communism” and “Sovietism,” in addition to the “Fordism” that characterized the northern United States. In fact, the original working title of *I'll Take My Stand* was “A Tract Against Communism.” But the anticommunism of the Agrarians should not be exaggerated. Communism or Marxism was never their principle target. The Agrarians were not familiar with Marxist theory, and their suspicion of communism was more a reflection of their provincialism rather than a product of their ideology. To the Agrarians, communism, Marxism, and socialism were simply synonymous with modernity, and they made no effort to distinguish among these beliefs, or even between these beliefs and American capitalism. “We therefore look upon the Communist menace as a menace indeed,” the Agrarians explained in their “Principles.” “Not as a Red one, but because it is simply according to the blind drift of

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., xxv.

<sup>20</sup> The convergence of themes between the critique of modernity of the Fugitives and the radical left was not coincidental. Years earlier the progressive historians drew upon a somewhat idealized conception of Jeffersonian agrarianism for their critique of the American political system, which they saw as dominated by an industrial plutocracy that employed a Hamiltonian conception of government to further their economic interests. For example, see Charles A. Beard, “Some Economic Origins of Jeffersonian Democracy,” *The American Historical Review* 19 (January, 1914), 282-298; Charles Austin Beard and Mary Ritter Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization*, (New York, 1933), vol. I.

our industrial development to expect in America at last much the same economic system as that imposed by violence upon Russia in 1917.”<sup>21</sup> Communists, socialists and industrialists all derived their values from science, and it was what the Agrarians called the “Cult of Science,” that is, the unrelenting quest for power over nature and the utilitarian value system that came with this quest -- that was their *bête noire*.

The antidote to industrialism and modernity proposed by the Agrarians was same thing that Eliot maintained was essential for the creation of superior literature – tradition. Just as Eliot argued that true literature engaged the living tradition of Western culture, the Agrarians believed that good society had to be based upon traditional southern values that recognized humanity as part of nature and encouraged the “life of the spirit,” as opposed to the crass materialism that characterized modernity.<sup>22</sup> In the United States, the South best exemplified the Agrarian ideal. Its predominately rural character, its culture based on traditional mores and customs, and its leisurely – or more natural -- pace of life distinguished the South from the chaotic industrial North. However, the Agrarians feared that this bucolic bastion was endangered. As Ransom explained in his essay, “Reconstructed But Unregenerated,” the proponents of the “New South” were working eagerly to transform the South into an imitation of the North.<sup>23</sup> But more was at stake than simply the future of the South. Ransom believed that in his beloved corner of the country was the last stand for a superior way of life. America, he argued, was becoming “infinitely progressive” and was waging a never ending war against nature and subjecting the individual to increasing regimentation, while threatening to put an end to “an established order of human existence, and that leisure which conditions the life of

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<sup>21</sup> Twelve Southerners, *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, xxiii-ix.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-22.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-27.

intelligence and the arts.” The only way to avoid this “human catastrophe” was for the South to resist this new “foreign invasion,” and revive its traditional way of life.<sup>24</sup>

There was more to Ransom’s essay than an inflammatory and reactionary call for resistance. It also contained an impassioned plea for the small farmer who was being forced off his land, and the essay was as much motivated by the distress of the Great Depression and the failure of the Hoover administration, as it was by the indignities caused by the Scopes trial. Unfortunately, Ransom’s social commentary was blinded by a sentimental understanding of the South and its history.<sup>25</sup> He described the social order of the Old South as “loosely graduated social orders, not fixed as in Europe” where relations were “personal and friendly.” “It was a kindly society, yet a realistic one,” Ransom explained, “for it was a failure if it could not be said that people were for the most part in their right places.” Furthermore, while “slavery was a feature monstrous enough in theory, but more often than not, human in practice, and it is impossible to believe that its abolition alone could have effected any great revolution in society.”<sup>26</sup>

Ransom’s conceptualization of an idealized South typified the essays in *I’ll Take My Stand*. There was a great deal of truth in the Agrarian’s description of modern industrialism, especially when one considers that their description was made during the nadir of the Depression. However, their social-political philosophy was based on a conceptualization of the South that, at best, could be described as fanciful. Another

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 22-23.

<sup>25</sup> To be fair to Ransom, the view that the Civil War had been a triumph only for the forces of industrialism and the northern plutocracy was a commonly accepted understanding of the period, even by respected historians. U.B. Phillips’s pro-South and anti-abolitionist interpretation was considered by many -- perhaps most -- American historians to be the definitive statement on the history of the South and the Civil War. Even the well known progressive historian Charles Beard had a rather dim view of the Civil War and considered the fourteenth amendment nothing more than a device to protect capitalist property rather than to protect the rights of African Americans. See, Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *American Negro Slavery*, (Baton Rouge, 1966); Beard and Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization*.

<sup>26</sup> Twelve Southerners, *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, 14.

example of Agrarian reasoning was Donald Davidson's essay on the plight of the artist in a modern society, "A Mirror for the Artist."<sup>27</sup> Again, his critique of the effects of a mass society upon the arts would have been familiar to the readers of *Partisan Review* a few years later. Yet, when it came to his proposed solution – that only the South was hospitable to true art – Donaldson had to abandon reality and somehow explain away the South's apparent failure to foster high culture up to that point in history. The so-called southern renaissance in literature was under way – indeed the Agrarians were a key part of it – but it was still too soon to be cited as an example of superior southern culture. Instead, Donaldson had to rely on a rather tortured comparison of "genuine" Southern folk art as opposed to the "manufactured" popular culture of the North. Perhaps, though, the most militant, and in some ways the most forthright, of the Agrarians was Allen Tate. In an unsettling defense of religious dogma (no particular dogma, just the idea of dogma), Tate frankly described the radical nature of his reactionary politics:

Since [the southerner] cannot bore from within, he has left the sole alternative of boring from without. This method is political, active, and, in the nature of the case, violent and revolutionary. Reaction is the most radical of programs; it aims at cutting away the overgrowth and getting back to the roots. A forward-looking radicalism is a contradiction; it aims at rearranging the foliage.<sup>28</sup>

The critique of modernity contained in *I'll Take My Stand* was, in its own way, as radical and as extreme as any communist or Marxist tract from the 1930s. The book was also somewhat naïve and ill-informed social criticism. It was the work of literary figures who had very little theoretical understanding of the political and economic situation at the time, and no practical experience. The Agrarians were better poets and literary critics than political theorists and social activists. Eventually the Agrarians realized this. By the

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 28-60.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 175.

end of the decade most of the Agrarians avoided social and political commentary, and when on occasion they did comment, they were sure to voice opinions that were regarded as mainstream and liberal. However, the New Critics never managed to break free completely of their association with the reactionary politics of the Agrarians. Allan Tate did not help the situation by being one of the few prominent New Critics who failed to renounce unambiguously his radical reactionary past. His 1941 book, *Reason and Madness*, was filled with fervent denunciations of science and calls for a return to tradition. It also ominously predicted that with a “few years,” perhaps “months,” the United States would become a totalitarian country.<sup>29</sup> As late as 1949, Tate’s awkward defense of his choice of Ezra Pound for the Bollingen Prize in the pages of *Partisan Review* caused controversy and aroused suspicions.<sup>30</sup> Incidents like this perpetuated the association of the New Criticism with political reaction. When New York critics -- Richard Chase, for example -- referred to the New Critics as the “Southern School,” they were making a not very subtle reference to their previously held appalling politics.<sup>31</sup> This political association plagued the New Critics decades after *I’ll Take My Stand* was published.

The association of the New Criticism with reaction, while not without justification, was an over-simplification, if not an outright mischaracterization. Not every critic who had a high regard for T.S. Eliot was politically conservative. One important American critic who defied the stereotype of the reactionary New Critic was F.O. Matthiessen. Matthiessen was a great admirer of Eliot and developed a close enough association with Ransom to be considered a New Critic. He was also a self-proclaimed

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<sup>29</sup> Allen Tate, *Reason in Madness: Critical Essays*, (Freeport, N.Y., 1968), 5.

<sup>30</sup> W.H. Auden et al., “The Question of the Pound Award,” *Partisan Review* 16 (May, 1949): 520.

<sup>31</sup> Chase, *Quest for Myth*, 5.

socialist. Yet Matthiessen was instrumental in introducing an American audience to T.S. Eliot's criticism. His 1935 book, *The Achievement of T.S. Eliot*, analyzed and explained the relationship between Eliot's poetry and his criticism. Like Eliot, Matthiessen was committed to the idea of aesthetic criticism and was alarmed by the "the increasing tendency to treat poetry as a social document and to forget that it is an art."<sup>32</sup> While Matthiessen realized by 1935 that Eliot was becoming increasingly conservative, he did not believe that this made Eliot's artistic perspective irreconcilable with his own. On the contrary, Matthiessen insisted that the conservative Christian views of Eliot were fundamentally inspired by the same outlook toward contemporary society that Matthiessen had as a socialist. "He objects to the modern worship of success," wrote Matthiessen, explaining Eliot's views, "the journalistic 'great man complex,' which sets up alike a Henry Ford and which, in glorifying alike the office-boy-to-millionaire or the corporal-to-dictator ideal, acclaims as necessary an unscrupulous directness of action."<sup>33</sup> Matthiessen even believed that Eliot's understanding of a "living tradition" was compatible with his desire of a socialist society that valued the collective welfare over that of the individual. Matthiessen explained,

Throughout his life Eliot has been in reaction against the centrifugal individualism which characterized the America into which he was born. His deep-seated desire to link him-self with a living tradition grew directly out of his revulsion against the lawless exploitation by which late nineteenth-century American individuals made any coherent society impossible.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> F. O. Matthiessen, *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot: An Essay on the Nature of Poetry*, 2d ed., (New York, 1947), vii.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

Matthiessen's admiration for Eliot illustrates that the methodology of the New Criticism did not necessarily lead to a conservative political outlook. If anything, the New Criticism was apolitical, and lent itself to a separation of art from politics.

The publication of Matthiessen's *The Achievement of T.S. Eliot* came at an opportune time for what would become known as the New Criticism, for by the mid-1930s Ransom realized that as a political program, Agrarianism was not viable. Yet, he still believed that the aesthetic principles that guided it had relevance. Specifically Ransom sought to create what he described as a "post-scientific" poetry and criticism.<sup>35</sup> The goals of combating industrialism and preserving a traditional society were abandoned. "The true poetry has no great interest in improving or idealizing the world," Ransom explained, "[it] only wants to realize the world, to see it better." The problem was that modern society was conditioned to rely on science as a means of comprehending the world. Unfortunately, science only provided information that satisfied the "cognitive department of animal life" and was merely a set of "abstract conveniences." Only poetry, Ransom argued, could understand the world wholly.<sup>36</sup> But for poetry to remain relevant in a world dominated by science, it had to reach a new standard of excellence. Like Eliot, Ransom condemned the romantic poetry of the nineteenth century as too removed from reality. It was intellectually primitive and emotionally undisciplined. In the scientific age, poetry, Ransom declared, had to be "a technical act, of extreme difficulty" if it was to "know the untechnical homely fullness of the world."<sup>37</sup>

When Ransom first coined the term the "New Criticism," he explained the paradoxical relationship between poetry and science. His "ontological" criticism

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<sup>35</sup> John Crowe Ransom, *The World's Body*, (New York, 1938), viii.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, x-xi.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

employed techniques that, in many ways, mirrored the precision and objectivity demanded by science.<sup>38</sup> The term “ontological” suggested a concern with the “essential being” of the text. For Ransom, this essential being -- that is, what distinguished poetry from other forms of discourse -- was found in the structure of a poem. To discern and analyze this structure, he relied on semiotic theory. Ransom was greatly impressed by the work of the philosopher Charles W. Morris. Morris elaborated upon the work of the originator of American semiotic theory, Charles Peirce. Like Peirce, Morris divided language into three categories, which he called *syntactical*, *semantical* and *pragmatical*. Ransom was particularly interested in Morris’s description of the *semantical* dimension, that is, the reference of a sign to an object. According to Morris, aesthetic discourse relied on what he referred to as an “iconic” sign. This is distinguished from an ordinary sign, or a sign used “scientifically,” in that the aesthetic or iconic sign imitates a particular object or set of objects. Thus while scientific discourse tends to use signs in a universal and interchangeable way – such as, the term *homo sapiens* stands for any and all human beings as a universal type – aesthetic or artistic discourse seeks to capture an aspect of reality through imitation and specific and direct association. The aspect of reality that the aesthetic sign seeks to capture could be an emotion or a thought as well as a physical object. Indeed, it could mean all of these things at once.<sup>39</sup>

Ransom took Morris’s conception of an aesthetic sign to mean that poetry conveyed a form of knowledge that was very real, but distinctive and different from scientific knowledge. Poetic discourse was holistic and impressionistic, while scientific discourse was reductionistic and definite. Ransom’s use of semiotics was ironic. Morris

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<sup>38</sup> Ransom, *The New Criticism*, 279-336.

<sup>39</sup> Charles W. Morris, "Peirce, Mead, and Pragmatism," *The Philosophical Review* 47 (March, 1938): 109-127; Ransom, *The New Criticism*, 286-294.

drew upon the tradition of pragmatism for his semiotics. He was more interested in the practical application of language than developing an aesthetic theory. Ransom, in contrast, used Morris's concept of icons to create an aesthetic theory that was, in many ways, the opposite of Pragmatism – it was a kind of anti-empiricism. Ransom believed that the purpose of criticism was to discern the meaning that arises from the tension between the formal aesthetic structure of a poem and the established meaning of the particular words that make up its prose. From this friction between two opposing tendencies, arose a kind of “indeterminacy” of meaning that was the proper target of sophisticated criticism.<sup>40</sup> This understanding of criticism was the very antithesis of modern positivism. Positivism (that is, the epistemology of science) valued knowledge that was not only precise but was also universal and replicable. Science was knowledge that broke nature into its constituent parts in order to understand and, to a large extent, to control it. The goal of the New Criticism was to describe a form of knowledge that could not be reduced to component parts. Poetry thus was a discourse that was the opposite of science, and it could therefore impart a more complete and complex understanding of reality. In contrast, although science provided human beings with unprecedented power, it also created the epistemological fragmentation that was characteristic of modernity.

There were similarities between the way that Lionel Trilling understood the role of literature and Ransom's belief that poetic discourse conveyed a type of knowledge as real and important as scientific discourse. The two men both agreed that literature could convey concepts that science was ill equipped to address. However, there was an aspect in which their understanding of criticism and literature diverged. Ransom's conception of an “ontological” criticism, suggested an autonomy and separateness from science that

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<sup>40</sup> Ransom, *The New Criticism*, 316.

Trilling was unwilling to concede. In his mind, science and literature may have distinctive discursive styles that were best suited for different types of knowledge, but he also believed that science and literature could inform one another – there was a necessary interdisciplinary discourse between them. In 1962, Trilling explained that despite the widespread belief that the cultures of science and literature were naturally antagonistic toward each other, they were in fact intimately connected. To ignore one at the expense of the other, he believed, was to deny the full potential of the human mind.<sup>41</sup>

In contrast, Ransom retained the prejudice against the scientific mindset that he displayed in *I'll Take My Stand*. Modern poets, Ransom maintained, “are antipathetic to the modern everyday world of business, science, and positivism.”<sup>42</sup> The political program of Agrarianism may have died sometime in the mid-thirties, but its desire to resist the cultural domination of science was retained in the precepts of the New Criticism. Ransom continued to insist that there was a “sharp formal or technical” and “philosophical distinction” between scientific and aesthetic discourse.<sup>43</sup> While in a very general sense the two discourses could inform the well-rounded intellectual, there could be little direct communication between them since they addressed entirely different categories of knowledge.

Although by the end of the 1930s Ransom had decided to abandon the political program of the Agrarians, he still had very ambitious plans for his conception of poetry and criticism. He described these plans in his 1937 essay, “Criticism, Inc.”<sup>44</sup> There were, according to Ransom, three different types of critics. One was the artist himself.

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<sup>41</sup> Lionel Trilling, “Science, Literature and Culture,” *Commentary* 33 (June, 1962): 461-477.

<sup>42</sup> Ransom, *The New Criticism*, 335.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 287.

<sup>44</sup> Ransom, *The World's Body*, 327-350.

While some of the best critics of poetry were poets, Ransom maintained that the artist was best equipped to focus narrowly on the “technical effects” of artwork. The second kind of critic was the philosopher. The philosopher, though, tended to know a lot about the function of art, but very little about its technical aspects. Ransom believed that the third type of critic ought to be the best critic – the professor of literature. He argued that a lifetime dedicated to the study of “a particular form of art” should allow the professor to combine the best aspects of the artist and philosopher, to understand the intricacies of technique while perceiving the larger function of art. Unfortunately, while professors of literature were “learned men” they were not “critical men.” Ransom condemned the historicism and bibliographical approach that dominated the English departments of American colleges and universities. “It is as if,” he explained, “with conscious or unconscious cunning, [the professors of literature] had appropriated every avenue of escape from their responsibility which was decent and official; so that it is easy for one of them without public reproach to spend a lifetime in compiling the data of literature and yet rarely or never commit himself to a literary judgment.”<sup>45</sup> This situation had to be rectified. Ransom believed that criticism needed to be more precise and, ironically, more “scientific.” Instead of the “occasional criticism by armatures,” he argued, “the whole enterprise might be seriously taken in hand by professionals.” What was needed, Ransom memorably declared, was a “criticism, inc., or criticism, ltd.” And because the “students of the future must be permitted to study literature, and not merely about literature,” the American academy, he insisted, had to be transformed into this corporation dedicated to professional criticism.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 328-329.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 330.

In 1937, Ransom was given an opportunity to implement his conception of “Criticism, Inc.” when the new president of Kenyon College, Gordon Chalmers, asked him to head the school’s English department.<sup>47</sup> The offer was fortuitous. Chalmers not only wanted Ransom to raise the level of scholarship of Kenyon, he also wanted Ransom to edit the college’s new journal. Originally, Chalmers envisioned a general interest periodical, such as *The Yale Review*, but Ransom convinced the president that he would do a better job editing a magazine dedicated to literature and criticism. He modeled *The Kenyon Review* on T.S. Eliot’s conception of a small literary magazine. While Ransom did not want “to be construed as representing some ‘school’ or theory of literature,” he insisted his journal embody “an ‘aesthetic’ or philosophy of art.”<sup>48</sup> Political and social issues were expressly outside the journal’s purview. When Ransom solicited an article from his fellow Agrarian, Donald Davidson, he told his friend, “we won’t be in the field for patriotic and agrarian things.”<sup>49</sup> As Ransom embarked on his career as editor he left the reactionary politics of the Agrarians far behind. *The Kenyon Review* became the leading journal of the New Criticism, but Ransom made sure to attract writers -- such as Eric Bentley, Philip Blair Rice (co-editor of *The Kenyon Review*), William Empson and F.O. Matthiessen -- whose criticism could be characterized as part of the New Criticism, but whose politics were far to the left of the Agrarians.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, while the overall tone of the journal reflected the sensibilities of the New Critics, Ransom made a conscious effort to include other critical styles. From the beginning of the project, he

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<sup>47</sup> Marian Janssen, *The Kenyon Review, 1939-1970: A Critical History*, (Baton Rouge, 1990), 10-45.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

solicited material from New York intellectuals, such as Lionel Trilling, Delmore Schwartz, and co-founder of the *Partisan Review*, Philip Rahv.<sup>51</sup>

Ransom used the *Kenyon Review*, not just to promote New Criticism, but also to promote broadly the concept of academic criticism. Kenyon College soon became a center for a new pedagogical criticism. In some ways, Ransom found himself in the right place, with the right ideas, at just the right time. American higher education was on the cusp of its great post-war expansion. And the New Criticism, with its pretensions of objectivity and “scientific” precision, was perfectly suited to the dominant epistemological tastes of the day. Furthermore, the creation of a distinct modern canon and the methodological uniformity of the New Criticism made it relatively easy to package and disseminate throughout the academy. In the words of one historian of the movement, the New Criticism was “a form of knowledge production that could fit the disciplinary model of the university.”<sup>52</sup> However, if the New Criticism was the right idea for the time, Ransom was certainly the right man to promote it. Over the next decade, he used his position at Kenyon to attract the best teachers and students of English literature, which soon led to a reputation that also attracted generous financial support from individual benefactors and research foundations. Ransom was an academic entrepreneur, who more than any single individual was responsible for the dominance that the New Criticism would command in the university until the late 1960s.

While Ransom made sure to reach out to critics beyond the New Critics-Kenyon College-Vanderbilt circle, and his relationship with the New York critics was certainly congenial, there always remained substantial philosophical differences between the New

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 38-41.

<sup>52</sup> Shumway, *Creating American Civilization: A Genealogy of American Literature as an Academic Discipline*, 231-232.

Critics and New Yorkers, especially when it came to the “cultural criticism” typified by the work of Lionel Trilling. Ransom and the other New Critics may have respected Trilling as a writer, but they could never accept his mixing of Freudianism and political, as well as ethical concerns, in his criticism. On the other hand, as agreeable as Ransom’s intellectual ecumenicalism was, the New Yorkers would always have lingering doubts about the legacy of Agrarianism. Even Trilling and Chase, who were perhaps more open-minded toward the New Critics than other New York intellectuals, could never quite forget their reactionary pasts. When Tate tried to defend his choice of Ezra Pound for the Bollinger prize, Trilling and Chase had to speculate on whether he was an anti-Semite.<sup>53</sup> They agreed that there was no evidence of anti-Semitism, but Chase commented with regard to Tate’s publish response to his critics, “Ole massa Tate done indeed write a reprehensible letter to PR.”<sup>54</sup> From a more substantial philosophical perspective, Trilling found the aestheticism of the New Critics, especially during the politically charged late 1940s, as something as an evasion, an escape from reality. In the end, Trilling won the battle, but lost the war. His political outlook – his anti-radical modernism – was very influential and helped shape the liberalism of the early Cold War. Ransom’s New Criticism, though, was able to establish itself firmly in the academy, and it had a far greater impact on the way literature was studied and criticized than Trilling’s work. Its heyday lasted until the late sixties, but its call for a close reading of the text and the canon

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<sup>53</sup> Richard Chase to Lionel Trilling, April 19 [1949], Box 2, Lionel Trilling Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

<sup>54</sup> Richard Chase to Lionel Trilling, May 9, 1949, Box 2, Lionel Trilling Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

it created continued to exert a profound influence on literary studies well after it was challenged by other critical methodologies.<sup>55</sup>

The difference between Ransom and Trilling was in how each conceptualized their roles as intellectuals. Ransom defined his mission narrowly. He wanted to shape literary criticism within the academy and meticulously built the academic institutions to insure his lasting influence. In many ways, Ransom's writings and criticism played a secondary role to his efforts as editor, teacher, and academic administrator. Trilling, in contrast, understood his role more broadly. His criticism was directed, as he described it, against all of "liberal culture." To be sure, this certainly included the "ideas of our powerful teaching colleges," but this was just one of the many cultural outlets that Trilling believed needed to be reformed. His overarching purpose was to subject liberalism, as it manifested itself in all facets of society, to "a critical effort of great seriousness" that would "enlighten" it, and prevent it from "corrupting and betraying" itself.<sup>56</sup> To do this, Trilling relied primarily on his work as a writer. This is not to say that he was not an influential and important teacher at Columbia University. However, Trilling never developed a "school," in the way that Ransom was able to do with his promotion of the New Criticism at Kenyon College.

While Trilling never approached Ransom's ability to cultivate a network of students and former students dedicated to a particular critical method, Trilling was by the late forties one of the most widely respected of the New York critics. Unlike many of his fellow New Yorkers, he was fairly well known and appreciated beyond narrow intellectual circle of the city. Indeed, due to the efforts of *Kenyon Review* assistant editor

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<sup>55</sup> William E. Cain, "The Institutionalization of the New Criticism," *MLN* 97 (December, 1982), 1100-1120.

<sup>56</sup> Richard Chase, Lionel Trilling, and William Barrett, "The Liberal Mind: Two Communications and a Reply," *Partisan Review* 16 (June, 1949), 649-665.

Phillip Rice, Trilling was able to cultivate a close relationship with Ransom as an advisory editor to the *Review*, and pave the way for other New York critics to publish beyond the New York journals of opinion.<sup>57</sup> Trilling also had at least one very dedicated disciple – Richard Chase. After completing his dissertation with the usual difficulties and complications, and spending two years as an English professor at Connecticut College, Chase was ready to promote Trilling’s vision of a politically informed literary criticism in the stronghold of the New Critics.

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<sup>57</sup> Janssen, *The Kenyon Review, 1939-1970*, 92-94.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### **A Summer at Kenyon College**

In 1948, Richard Chase was accepted as a fellow to the first secession of the Kenyon School of English. The school was another example of John Crowe Ransom's academic entrepreneurship. A year earlier, Ransom convinced the Rockefeller Foundation, which had already made a substantial donation to the *Kenyon Review*, to fund a summer program in which graduate students would be taught seminars by some of the country's most prominent literary critics. The idea was to introduce the large post-war influx of graduate students to something other than the "historical-bibliographical" curriculum that dominated the English departments of most colleges at that time.<sup>1</sup> Naturally, the New Criticism was expected to be a staple at the Kenyon School of English; but Ransom, always mindful of what attracted the support of wealthy and high-minded foundations, took care to reach out to other schools of criticism and even non-academic critics. As in the case of the *Review*, he recognized that Lionel Trilling's name would give the School of English credibility and serve as proof of its intellectual ecumenicalism. Thus, he asked Trilling to serve, along with himself and F. O. Matthiessen, as a senior fellow. Ransom also used Trilling's participation as a way of extracting a promise from the Rockefeller Foundation that it would guarantee the grant for three years by claiming that someone as prestigious as Trilling would not lend his support to a minor one-summer project.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>.Ibid., 165.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 162-163.

For Richard Chase, serving as a fellow for the school was a tremendous professional opportunity. The School's purpose, as conceived by Ransom, was to train a "professional cadre" that, in turn, would replace the typical old-style bibliographic English curriculum with literary criticism employed "with intelligent purpose."<sup>3</sup> Therefore Chase had a chance to help shape the way English would be taught in the post-war era. From a pedagogic point of view, he would be able to make an important contribution to the profession. It also provided an occasion for Chase to acquaint the big names in literary criticism outside the *Partisan Review* circle with his work, as well as to defend and promote Trilling's particular brand of literary criticism.

Although barely two years from getting his Ph.D. and without any books to his credit, Chase had published outside of the *Partisan Review* and was not completely unknown to at least some of the New Critics. In another example of his reaching out to critical styles and tastes other than his own, as well as displaying diplomatic deference to Trilling, Ransom had already published two articles by Chase in the *Kenyon Review*. The first article, titled "A Sense of the Present," boldly attacked T.S. Eliot's poetry and criticism.<sup>4</sup> In stark contrast to F.O. Matthiessen, who described Eliot's poetry as striving for "a sense of the immediate," Chase accused Eliot of being "much more rigid, arbitrary and materialistic than the living present." In common with other mystics, the article asserted, Eliot tended to "oscillate wildly between the material and the spiritual" and failed to "deal adequately with the middle world – the vast exciting range of effective reality between the violently material and the violently spiritual."<sup>5</sup> The article even went so far as to attack the sacred text of all modernist writers – *The Waste Land* – by

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<sup>3</sup> Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*, 157-159.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Chase, "The Sense of the Present," *The Kenyon Review* 7 (Spring, 1945), 218-231.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

describing its use of mythic imagery as haphazard and without “tangible human experience.”<sup>6</sup> Eliot’s criticism similarly obscured the true problems that the contemporary artist faces by failing to describe how “poetry is actually written.” Instead, Chase declared, “we can only feel that [Eliot] is not here concerned to study poetry but to canonize it.”<sup>7</sup>

Chase’s essay was basically the introduction to his dissertation and clearly echoed the concerns of his thesis advisor.<sup>8</sup> The attack on T.S. Eliot reflected Lionel Trilling’s insistence that literature must demonstrate a certain realism and that criticism should be ever mindful of contemporary moral problems. Although Chase employed the myth criticism that would eventually distinguish his work from Trilling’s, at this stage of his career Chase’s conception of myth as a sub-textual structure closely resembled Trilling’s understanding of the relationship between the Freudian unconscious and literature. Chase, though, did more than imitate Trilling’s critical methodology; in “The Sense of the Present,” he even copied Trilling’s subject matter. Instead of turning to the early American writers who were the focus of his scholarly interests, Chase drew upon the Victorian critics who so fascinated Trilling.<sup>9</sup> To counter Eliot’s assertion that a poem had an existence entirely separate from its author, Chase quoted Coleridge’s pronouncement that “the poet described in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of a man into activity.”<sup>10</sup> Chase even turned to the Mathew Arnold. Although he conceded that Eliot might have a more “tragic sense of life” than the Victorians, Chase insisted that

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>8</sup> Chase, *Quest for Myth*, v-viii.

<sup>9</sup> In addition to copying Trilling usual subject matter, the title of Chase’s essay was a play on Trilling’s 1942 essay, which defended historical contextualization against the New Criticism. See, Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, 172-186.

<sup>10</sup> Chase, “The Sense of the Present,” 223.

Eliot nevertheless failed to follow Arnold's "exhortation to the poets; that he must see life steadily and see it whole."<sup>11</sup> Reflecting Trilling's misgivings about the entire modernist literary project, Chase questioned Eliot's reliance on the French symbolists, especially their understanding of myth as intrinsically in opposition to a rational and civilized worldview. Chase argued instead that the symbolists were "ambiguous and self-destructive" and that they utterly failed in their attempt to unite past and present and could not comprehend life as it exists today.<sup>12</sup>

Although Chase's second article in the *Kenyon Review* would appear over a year later, it was a good companion piece to his first article.<sup>13</sup> In his first article, "The Sense of the Present," Chase described how myth was misused by critics and poets. In the following article, he attempted to demonstrate the proper way to incorporate myth in literature and criticism. Again the subject matter reflected the interests of Trilling rather than of Chase. Ignoring his own work on New England authors such as Melville, Chase turned to the Bronte sisters. In a criticism of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* that employed Freudian analysis and contemporary anthropological conceptions of myth, Chase challenged the common depiction of the Brontes as rebels opposing stifling Victorian gender norms. While Chase did not deny that the Bronte novels, especially *Jane Eyre*, were early feminist tracts, he insisted that overall the two novelists were "true-blue Victorians."<sup>14</sup> Their genius, Chase argued, was in their ability to portray Victorian society in a mythic manner that fully illustrated the profound psychological, as well as social, conflict that characterized the era. For Chase, the Bronte sisters did not portray

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 224.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Chase, "The Brontes," *The Kenyon Review* 9 (Autumn, 1947), 487-506.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 488.

contemporary male oppression as much as they depicted the chaos caused by unrestrained “primeval” male energy. In both novels, the primary male characters – Rochester and Heathcliff – display a frightening energy, or *élan* as Chase put it. In contrast, the female characters are “cultural heroines” who must in some way tame or dissipate this energy in order to establish a “higher state of society.” And yet the Bronte heroines ultimately fail or, at best, are only partially successful in their attempt to remake society. To Chase this is not due to the insurmountable pressures created by society, but rather it is due to a conscious choice by the heroines to retreat from rebellion. Using language derived from the anthropological study of myth, as well as Toynbee, he explained that the heroines recoil from performing the “dynamic act” of rebellion that truly overthrows the “tyrannical father-God.” Instead their rebellion is only half complete and at the end of the novels society finds itself in a subdued state of stasis.<sup>15</sup>

This is, of course, an incredibly anti-radical reading of the Bronte sisters. Chase denied not only the notion that they were “romantic rebels,” but he went further to insist that a rebellious attitude was not necessary, and indeed perhaps an impediment, to the creation of great literature and relevant cultural criticism. Thus, according to his formulation, the Brontes were great writers not *despite* the fact they were conventional Victorians, but were actually great and important *because* they conformed to the moral norms of their day and, at the same time, portrayed the deeply rooted psychological and cultural fissures of their society. Both *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* end with happy marriages, and with, what Chase insists is, the “triumph of the moderate, secular, naturalistic, liberal, sentimental point of view over the mythical, religious and tragic.” Although nobody knew the potential horrors of Victorian domestic life better than the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 498.

Bronte sisters, and they clearly revealed this with tremendous psychological insight in their books, Chase applauded the fact that they turned away from a “futurist utopia of sexual society,” and returned to the calm of bourgeois domesticity.<sup>16</sup>

This reading of the Bronte sisters would be correctly seen today as profoundly anti-feminist. But in 1947, the feminism of the Bronte sisters was not as much an issue as their general anti-establishment stance. Could they, or any novelist, be regarded as an effective member of the avant-garde without forceful opposition to societal norms? Indeed, was the very concept of an avant-garde necessary for, or even compatible with, the creation of superior literature? These were some of the questions that preoccupied many post-war critics. For answers, Chase again relied on his mentor. Lionel Trilling’s position was clear. He had only recently in a review of Theodore Dreiser’s posthumous novel, *The Bulwark*, denounced the progressive criticism that judged the worthiness of a novelist by his or her political iconoclasm and excused any shortcomings in style and diction. “It is as if wit and flexibility of mind, as if perception and knowledge,” wrote Trilling, “were to be equated with aristocracy, while dullness and stupidity must naturally suggest a virtuous democracy.”<sup>17</sup>

While many of the critics associated with the New Criticism – with the notable exception of F.O. Matthiessen – sympathized with Trilling’s critique of the progressive excuses for vulgarity and crude propaganda in literature, they nevertheless maintained an ideal of the author as an outsider, as someone who transcends society in order to judge it. After all Eliot’s exhortation that Western literature must be seen as an organic whole was a way for the poet and the critic to break free from the mediocrity and stifling mass

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 505-506.

<sup>17</sup> Trilling, “Dreiser and the Liberal Mind,” 466-472.

society of modernity. Trilling, in contrast, was suggesting that in transcending society, insight into that society was lost. Thus, Chase praised the Bronte sisters precisely because they did not rise above their Victorian culture. And the essay, although it does not mention Eliot specifically, suggests that the Bronte sisters' incorporation of the structure and style of mythology, rather than the incorporation of specific myths or a specific mythic tradition, was stylistically superior to Eliot's method. The Bronte sisters, Chase believed, also better illustrated the dilemmas and conflicts, and even tragedy, of their age than Eliot's haphazard insertion of the detritus of the ruined past.

These two articles clearly marked Chase as a disciple of Trilling and a skeptic about the New Criticism. Given the fact that Trilling would not actually be present for the 1948 session, it might be said that Chase was Trilling's proxy to the Kenyon School of English. At least that is the impression that Ransom gave to the other school fellows. Throughout the summer, he constantly referred to Chase as "Trilling's star pupil."<sup>18</sup> However, despite his articles and Ransom's billing, most of the fellows were not very familiar with Chase. Also it appears that the school's administrative staff had not heard of him at all. At the start of the session he was often confused with another Richard Chase who was a specialist in southern Appalachian folktales and music. Apparently the books of this Richard Chase had been included in a display set up in the Kenyon bookstore devoted to the works of the fellows of the School of English.<sup>19</sup> Some of the southern writers expressed happy surprise at Chase's interest in the "rural stories of the

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<sup>18</sup> Richard Chase to Frances Chase, July 3 [1948], Box 3a, Richard Chase Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University. Note: These letters were later incorrectly dated by Frances Chase as from the summer of 1949; however, it is obvious from their content – e.g., Richard Chase was not a fellow of the Kenyon School of English in 1949 and several references to the primaries of the Republican, Democratic and Progressive Parties – that they should be dated 1948.

<sup>19</sup> It seems that our Richard V. Chase was confused with Richard Chase the author of *Grandfather Tales: American-English Folktales* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1948), *The Jack Tales* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943), and other books on American folktales and music.

South,” and one student even asked the native New Englander to call a square dance. Chase politely demurred, not wanting, as he told his wife, to “disembarrass people.”<sup>20</sup>

Despite the humorous confusion, it was not long before the other fellows and Chase got to know one another well. It was soon apparent to the New Criticism-inclined fellows that Chase was a follower of the politics of the *Partisan Review* and a practitioner of Trilling’s approach to criticism. Chase’s seminars reflected the intellectual eclecticism that characterized the criticism of New York intellectuals. They were filled with frank discussions of Freud, modern anthropology, social psychology and various other cultural concerns. It must have been a stark contrast to the close reading of the text favored by the New Critics. Some students even complained that their instructor had gone too far when Chase insisted that Melville and Hawthorne were morally relevant to “ourselves and our culture.”<sup>21</sup> Conversely, Chase complained to his wife that although he respected much of their work, he could not help feeling that the New Critics were limited by their failure to utilize, or even understand, modern psychology and sociology.<sup>22</sup>

When it came to politics, Chase was shocked by what he perceived as the extraordinary naïveté of the New Critics. He assured his wife, Frances, that they were indeed liberal and not reactionary neo-confederates, although he found Tate’s celebration of Jefferson Davis’s birthday with the other fellows somewhat odd, albeit somewhat charming as well. What struck Chase, though, was that most of the fellows were either uninterested in politics, or their views were incoherent. In a season of political

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<sup>20</sup> Richard Chase to Frances Chase, July 2 [1948], Box 3a, Richard Chase Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

<sup>21</sup> Richard Chase to Frances Chase, July 1 [1948], Box 3a, Richard Chase Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Chase to Frances Chase, July 8, [1948], Box 3a, Richard Chase Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

conventions, Chase got to observe the political reactions of the New Critics to an especially divisive and close presidential campaign. Naturally no one supported the Republicans, at least not publicly. For southerners, such as Ransom and Tate, voting for the party of Lincoln was unthinkable. For the others who in some way identified with the political left, the choice was between the uninspiring President Truman and the insurgent Progressive Party candidate, Henry Wallace. Chase, in keeping with the editorial line of the *Partisan Review*, saw Wallace as a Stalinist dupe and could not understand how anyone with an objective and clear mind could support the third party candidate.

And yet it appeared to Chase that the New Critic fellows were remarkably careless in their political orientation. He reported to Frances Chase that he was amazed to find that most of the fellows and many of his students believed that politics and art were not necessarily related, and that a critic or an artist did not need any “social consciousness.” The politics of the southerners was simply embarrassing to Chase. They appeared to believe that their Agrarian program had some relevancy in the modern world – that their combination of “medieval” and “Jeffersonian” politics was actually workable. The politics of the British fellows were even odder. Chase found that William Empson was politically apathetic, while he could only describe the drama critic Eric Bentley as a “Nietzschean vitalist.”<sup>23</sup> In actuality, both men sympathized with the political left, but the fact that they did not generally discuss political matters and their criticism did not contain an obvious political polemic was in stark contrast to the politically charged atmosphere of the New York intellectuals.

The critic with the most remarkable and objectionable politics to Chase was F.O. Matthiessen. Where the other fellows were rather casual about their own politics and

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<sup>23</sup> Richard Chase to Frances Chase, July 1 [1948].

open minded toward the political opinion of others, Matthiessen was single-minded and intense in his support of Henry Wallace. In fact, he took time off from the summer session to give a speech on Wallace's behalf at the Progressive Party convention. He was by far the most politically engaged among critics associated with the New Criticism. Early in his life, Matthiessen had declared himself a dedicated socialist. In 1920, as a freshman at Yale, he supported socialist Eugene Webs for president. Four years later, he would have supported La Follette if he had not been Europe. Instead, while at Oxford, he joined the Labour Club under the direction of R.H. Tawney and Bertrand Russell. Even though he had joined the Socialist Party in 1932, he supported Roosevelt's New Deal, albeit always from the left. Above all, Matthiessen yearned for a European-style political party with a "trade union base" that could teach "the first-hand facts of economic organization" to intellectuals, while they, in turn, helped "provide ideas for leadership."<sup>24</sup>

Socialism, however, was only one component of Matthiessen's political outlook. He was also a dedicated Christian. Matthiessen admired the Christian sense of tragedy. He saw in traditional Christianity a sense of humanity's inadequacy – its inability to achieve social justice -- as a necessary alternative to the simple optimism of American liberals. Drawing upon Reinhold Niebuhr – and conveniently ignoring Niebuhr's strident anticommunism during the late forties – Matthiessen appreciated the reality of original sin and understood it as a repudiation of the confident individualism that characterized so much of American culture.<sup>25</sup> But he also perceived a message of hope in Christianity. He called himself a Christian socialist, and while he understood man as "fallible and limited, no matter what his social system," he also believed the commandment to "love

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<sup>24</sup> F.O. Matthiessen, *From the Heart of Europe*, (New York, 1948), 74-75.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 82; Giles B. Gunn, *F.O. Matthiessen: The Critical Achievement*, (Seattle, Washington, 1975), 153-154.

thy neighbor as thyself” as an imperative for social action. Although he admired T.S. Eliot as a critic, he rejected Eliot’s Christian traditionalism and the political quietism that it implied. “Evil is not merely external,” Matthiessen explained, “but external evils are many, and some social systems are far more productive of them than others.” Radicalism and revolution were to him a religious, as well as political, imperative. Thus Matthiessen accepted the “Russian Revolution as the most progressive event of our century, the necessary successor to the French revolution and the American Revolution and to England’s seventeenth-century Civil War.”<sup>26</sup> Perfection may be impossible, but he was sure that history had shown that progress, and in the twentieth century that meant economic democracy was still viable. Although excesses had been committed by the Russians in the name of their revolution, and no matter how “short they may have fallen in some of Lenin’s aims,” Matthiessen was consoled by the fact they have “not been deflected from the right of all to share in the common wealth.”<sup>27</sup>

Given Matthiessen’s positive feelings toward the Soviet Union, it is not surprising that he saw the escalating Cold War as nothing less than a political catastrophe. It was also a personal catastrophe. As Chase reported to his wife, Matthiessen believed that the rising tide of anticommunism in the United States was creating a climate of fear. He believed that free speech “in such places as the Kenyon School of English” hung by “a very thin thread.” Chase ridiculed this idea and accused Matthiessen of deliberately ignoring the “real centers of irresponsible power and conspiracy.”<sup>28</sup> But Chase was being both unkind and narrow-minded. Having no record of radicalism in his past and being respectfully married, it was easy for him to mock Matthiessen’s fears as paranoia.

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<sup>26</sup> Matthiessen, *From the Heart of Europe*, 82-83.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>28</sup> Richard Chase to Frances Chase, July 1 [1948].

Matthiessen, in contrast, not only had a long public record of supporting radical left-wing organizations, he was also a semi-closeted homosexual. Although Senator Joe McCarthy would not enter the political limelight until 1950, by 1947 the Truman administration had instituted a loyalty program, and the House Un-American Activities Committee was very active. A summons from HUAC was a very real threat to Matthiessen – the public exposure could ruin him. He feared that his position at Harvard University was in real jeopardy. Thus it is not surprising that he referred to the editors of *Partisan Review* as “skunks,” who were unfairly associating him with Stalinism.<sup>29</sup>

Despite all this, one cannot deny that there was an element of real psychological paranoia in Matthiessen. He was, unquestionably, a troubled man. He had been hospitalized in 1938 for depression, and since the death of his lover, Russell Chaney, in 1945, Matthiessen had been in a psychological free fall.<sup>30</sup> This breakdown would culminate in April 1950, when he committed suicide. It is tempting to see Matthiessen as a casualty of the Cold War. However, he was not as vulnerable or as isolated as he believed. Matthiessen had friends in the academy. The New Critics were quite protective of him. Chase noted how Matthiessen was generally loved at the Kenyon School, and even Chase understood and sympathized with this, admitting that Matthiessen was “so innocent and means so well.”<sup>31</sup> It is quite possible and perhaps even probable that Matthiessen would have survived as a critic during the Red Scare of the early fifties. Not only did he have important friends, his work was well respected and it is hard to imagine that he would not be able to carry on in some capacity. Unfortunately,

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<sup>29</sup> Richard Chase to Frances Chase, July 6, [1948], Box 3a, Richard Chase Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

<sup>30</sup> Cain, *F.O. Matthiessen and the Politics of Criticism*, 46-48.

<sup>31</sup> Richard Chase to Frances Chase, July 1 [1948].

he probably also would have been exposed publicly as a homosexual, something that his fragile psyche was not prepared for, regardless of the implications to his career. In any case, it is clear that the death of his lover, the threat of public exposure, and what from his perspective was the collapse of any political hope for the future, combined to devastate his mental health.

This undoubtedly made Matthiessen a somewhat prickly character to deal with. Throughout the summer, Chase constantly described him as “morose,” “humorless,” and “without any grace.”<sup>32</sup> They had difficulties from the start of the session. When Chase first met Matthiessen, he described him as an “odious little man.”<sup>33</sup> Their politics were diametrically opposed to one another, and Matthiessen was wary of Chase as a representative of the *Partisan Review* crowd. But more than politics was at work here. Chase simply disliked him. Where others apparently found Matthiessen -- or “Matty,” as he like to be called -- charmingly eccentric, Chase found him annoyingly inappropriate. When at a school forum on Freudianism Matthiessen publicly announced that he had been analyzed, and from this experience had come to doubt the scientific integrity of analysis, Chase was dumbfounded by what he saw as an inappropriate personal disclosure. He wrote to Trilling about the incident and declared that Matthiessen was “mad, mad.” Chase was even annoyed with the way Matthiessen talked back to the speakers at the Democratic convention – calling the orators “baby,” as in “that’s what you think baby”-- while he, Chase, and the other fellows listened to the convention on the

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid; Richard Chase to Lionel Trilling, July 3, 1948, Box 2, Lionel Trilling Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

<sup>33</sup> Richard Chase to Frances Chase, June 25, [1948], Box 3a, Richard Chase Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

radio.<sup>34</sup> Chase confided to his wife that his initial impression of Matthiessen was correct and that he “should never have tried to exchange anything with him but pleasantries.”<sup>35</sup> And to his mentor Chase complained that Matthiessen was telling everyone at the school that “Chase despises me.” “I dare say that it is all very simple with Matty,” wrote Chase. “If you don’t openly love him, roll up your shirt sleeves, and call him ‘Matty’ before you even meet him, he very eagerly concludes that you’re consigning him to the cold chaotic void.” Chase could never bring himself to call Matthiessen “Matty,” despite the fact that he “had no trouble” calling the other fellows by their first names.<sup>36</sup>

It would be easy to dismiss Chase’s attitude to Matthiessen as a product of homophobia, but this is an over-simplification. Chase was not homophobic. He certainly had homosexual friends, and he celebrated some of the homoerotic elements of American literature. However, he did have what can be described as a condescending tolerance toward homosexuals that was common among liberal-minded people of that era -- especially among those who considered themselves followers of Freud.<sup>37</sup> An example of this occurred when Chase found himself defending a Leslie Fiedler article describing

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<sup>34</sup> Richard Chase to Lionel Trilling, July 17, 1948, Box 2, Lionel Trilling Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

<sup>35</sup> Richard Chase to Frances Chase, July 6, [1948].

<sup>36</sup> Richard Chase to Lionel Trilling, August 9, 1948, Box 2, Lionel Trilling Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

<sup>37</sup> Lionel Trilling’s negative review of the *Kinsey Report*, which appeared in the April 1948 issue of *Partisan Review*, illustrates the conflicted view that many liberals at the time had of homosexuality. Trilling insisted that the fact that many psychiatrists do not try to change a homosexual’s behavior, but rather “help an individual accept himself,” did not imply that “these psychiatrists have thereby judged homosexuality to be an unexceptionable form of sexuality.” Trilling further described what he understood as the responsible psychiatric diagnosis and treatment of homosexuality: “[Psychiatrists] able to effect no change in the psychic disposition and therefore do the sensible and humane next thing [i.e., help the homosexual, “accept himself”]. Their opinion of the etiology of homosexuality as lying in some warp – as our culture judges it – of the psychic structure has not, I believe, changed. And I think that they would say that the condition that produced the homosexuality also produced other character traits on which judgment could be passed. This judgment need by no means be totally adverse; as passed upon individuals it need not be adverse at all; but there can be no doubt that a society in which homosexuality was dominant or even accepted would be different in nature and quality from one in which it was censured.” See, Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, 226-227.

homoerotic themes in classic American literature against the assault of the other fellows, including Matthiessen. Fiedler's article compared the plight of the American homosexual to that of the "Negro" – both presented contemporary society with an unpleasant contradiction. He argued that in the case of the homosexual, Americans ought to change their laws to reflect the "social reality," while in the case of the "Negro," Americans must change their social behavior in accordance "with our laws" (presumably Fiedler meant American higher, or basic laws, such as the Constitution and the spirit of the Declaration of Independence and not various state laws that made an odious social practice legally mandated). In the absence of this reconciliation, Fiedler argued, Americans have mythologized homoerotic relationships, infantilizing and at the same time idealizing them.<sup>38</sup> The Kenyon fellows, specifically Tate, Brooks, and Matthiessen, denied that there was anything especially "American" about the depiction of the homosexual in American literature, and instead it simply reflected the larger attitude of Western culture in general. Chase agreed with them up to a point but maintained that Fiedler was onto something in describing "homosexuality in a special American sense." Chase concluded that the whole circumlocutory argument was in Matthiessen's case simple "a defense mechanism."<sup>39</sup> Indeed, Chase often psychoanalyzed Matthiessen, describing him as "self-divided" and paralyzed by an "unresolved Oedipus Complex."<sup>40</sup>

When Chase described Matthiessen as "self-divided," he meant it in a double sense. One was noting Matthiessen's ambivalent attitude toward his own sexuality. This was in part a condescending insult and in part an acute observation. At least one recent

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<sup>38</sup> Leslie A. Fiedler, "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey!" *Partisan Review* 15 (June, 1948): 664-671.

<sup>39</sup> Richard Chase to Frances Chase, July 6, [1948].

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*; Richard Chase to Frances Chase, July 8, [1948].

critic has noticed that Matthiessen was uncomfortable with his homosexuality, and at times deliberately denounced the depiction of homosexual themes in American literature.<sup>41</sup> The other way that Chase meant by divided was in an intellectual sense. Matthiessen presented Chase and Trilling with a peculiar problem. He was not a progressive critic in the mold of Parrington. On the contrary, in the introduction to *American Renaissance*, Matthiessen declared that his purpose was the opposite of Parrington's. Where the author of *Main Currents of American Thought* deliberately avoided "evaluating reputations and weighing literary merits," and instead focused on simply understanding "what our fathers thought," Matthiessen set out to restore aesthetic criticism. Despite his sincere admiration for Parrington, Matthiessen feared that the American understanding of literature had "been retarded by the tendency of some of his [i.e., Parrington's] followers to regard all criticism as 'belletristic triflings.'"<sup>42</sup> Historicism had reduced the great works of literature to mere artifacts. Matthiessen's purpose was to remind the historian that "he reads books, whether of the past or the present, because they have an immediate life of their own."<sup>43</sup>

Trilling and Chase readily agreed with Matthiessen's goal of proving relevancy of literature to present-day life. Indeed, the desire to rescue literature from the stale historicism of the scholar and to revive a contemporary critical sensibility is what united Matthiessen, the New Critics, Chase, Trilling, and many New York intellectuals. It explains Ransom's intellectual ecumenicalism, and why his academic entrepreneurship was so successful. He not only championed an approach to literary studies that

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<sup>41</sup> Cain, *F.O. Matthiessen and the Politics of Criticism*, 47-48.

<sup>42</sup> F.O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*, (New York, 1941), ix.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

celebrated the contemporary relevance of aesthetic criticism, he mustered an intellectual coalition that overwhelmed the old historicist guard. Nevertheless, there were important differences between Trilling and his New Critic allies. The close reading of texts favored by the New Critics and their emphasis on form left little room for connecting literature to contemporary cultural and political concerns. As Chase explained to his wife, the New Critics were a necessary corrective not only to the stale academics, but also to the New Humanists, such as Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmore, who so focused on moral questions that “they neglected literature.” Unfortunately, according to Chase, the New Critics had gone too far and have used “the study of text” as a way “to evade understanding the psychology of human beings and the workings of culture and politics.”<sup>44</sup>

From Chase’s and Trilling’s perspective, the evasion of the New Critics was a pardonable sin. Matthiessen, though, had done something far more serious than simply ignore contemporary politics and culture. According to Trilling and Chase, he allowed politics to dictate his critical sensibilities. This was the great failing of the progressive and Marxist critics of the twenties and thirties. But Matthiessen had demonstrated a keen aesthetic sensibility and a feel for form that put him squarely in the New Critic camp. Even Chase admitted that there was “much good material” in Matthiessen’s groundbreaking books, *The Achievement of T.S. Eliot* and *American Renaissance*.<sup>45</sup> His support for Wallace could be excused as naiveté, and besides, direct political confrontations were not what Trilling was primarily interested in. His project was to influence political thought by dictating critical tastes. Matthiessen had transgressed Trilling’s concept of

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<sup>44</sup> Richard Chase to Frances Chase, July 18, [1948], Box 3a, Richard Chase Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

<sup>45</sup> Richard Chase to Frances Chase, July 24, [1948], Box 3a, Richard Chase Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

good taste by allowing his bad politics to affect his criticism, and what made it all the worse was that he should have known better. Thus Chase saw Matthiessen as intellectually divided against himself, constantly trying to reconcile (and at times subordinating) his superior aesthetic sensibilities to his inferior political impulses. Chase nicely summarized Matthiessen's dilemma: "He wants people to love *both* Henry James and Dreiser, *both* T.S. Eliot and Henry Wallace."<sup>46</sup>

Matthiessen's affection for Dreiser especially vexed Trilling. Two years before Chase attended the Kenyon School of English, Trilling and Matthiessen sparred over the literary merits of Theodore Dreiser. In a review of Dreiser's posthumous novel, *The Bulwark*, Matthiessen praised the Naturalist author for his sense of social justice and social realism. He gave credit to Dreiser for replacing the genteel novel of romanticized morality with "the stuff of our common existence, not as it was hoped to be by any idealized theorist, but as it actually was in its crudity." It is this social realism --the brutal depiction of the cruel realities of modern industrial society-- that made Dreiser in Matthiessen's mind an important, indeed essential, American novelist. His last book, however, was especially appealing to Matthiessen because it had a religious theme. The novel was the story of how wealth and modern life erode the religious sensibilities of a once pious Quaker family. For Matthiessen it was a perfect parable embodying his conception of Christian socialism. It was not, however, a perfect book. In an example of the divided sensibilities Chase would later notice, Matthiessen confessed that the book had serious stylistic problems. The writing was often quite bad. He explained that Dreiser's "word-sense" was "as cumbersome as ever" and quoted several examples of awkward phrasing. But this aesthetic problem was of little consequence to Matthiessen.

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<sup>46</sup> Richard Chase to Frances Chase, July 1 [1948].

The theme of the novel and its philosophical underpinnings more than excused its less than perfect prose.<sup>47</sup>

From Trilling's perspective, Matthiessen's rationalization of Dreiser's obvious failings as an artist was the very essence of what Trilling called the liberal failure of imagination. A month after the appearance of Matthiessen's review, Trilling attacked Dreiser and the critics who defended him in the pages of the *Nation*.<sup>48</sup> Trilling began by noting how Henry James has been slighted by contemporary American critics, despite his obvious artistic excellence, because they found his depiction of late nineteenth-century bourgeois-aristocratic society not relevant in the age of the common man. In contrast, Trilling bitterly noted, Dreiser's clumsy prose and crude plotting were excused, even celebrated, because his novels represented the thinking and the vantage point of the average man, or the "peasant," as Parrington put it. This deliberate abandonment of any sense of taste or aesthetic standards had political roots, but Trilling saw something in it that was more serious. What liberal critics were afraid of, he argued, was the "electric qualities of mind" demonstrated by James. Thus, the failure of taste was indicative of a more serious failure to understand reality that led liberal critics to overlook the fact that James's "literary gentility" could teach the modern reader a great deal about life's moral complexities.<sup>49</sup>

Trilling's comparison of the response of American critics to James and Dreiser had special significance to Matthiessen. Unlike the progressive critics who Trilling cited, such as Parrington and Granville Hicks, Matthiessen had expressed admiration for James,

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<sup>47</sup> F.O. Matthiessen, "God, Mammon and Mr. Dreiser," *The New York Times Book Review*, March 24, 1946, 1-2,44.

<sup>48</sup> Trilling, "Dreiser and the Liberal Mind," 466-472.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 466.

and in general applauded the moral complexity demonstrated by James, Melville, Hawthorne, and other difficult American novelists. Therefore when Trilling quoted Matthiessen as utilizing the “liberal cliché” that Dreiser should be valued because he was in opposition to the “idealizing theorists” of the genteel tradition, he was not just drawing attention to Matthiessen’s subordination of aesthetic judgment to political necessities, he was also calling him a hypocrite. But what is even more important in Trilling’s critique is what he did not say. He did not argue that Dreiser became a communist and therefore his literature is tainted. Nor did he point out that Matthiessen’s politics disqualify him from being critic.

Other New York intellectuals were not as delicate as Trilling was. Proponents of the rising Cold War were arguing that any sympathy for the Soviet Union was fundamentally dishonest and reflected a deliberate effort – a conspiracy, in fact – to mislead the world about the true nature and intentions of the communist regime. Even some of the more moderate intellectuals who were alarmed with the rightward drift that too many former progressives seemed to be taking, were not above dangerous insinuations that were perilously close to red baiting. For example, Irving Howe described Matthiessen as a “sentimental fellow-traveler.”<sup>50</sup> In a review of Matthiessen’s book, *From the Heart of Europe*, Howe accused the literary critic of being a Stalinist sycophant. The book was perhaps one of the most ill-timed books in publishing history. It recounted Matthiessen’s stay in Europe during the summer and fall of 1947. In the book, Matthiessen described the Czechoslovakian government as purely a creation of the Czech people and said that it was free from any interference from the Soviet Union.

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<sup>50</sup> Irving Howe, “The Sentimental Fellow-Traveling of F.O. Matthiessen,” *Partisan Review* 15 (October, 1948), 1125-1129.

Unfortunately, *From the Heart of Europe* came out just weeks after a Soviet engineered coup destroyed any remnant of Czechoslovakian independence. Given these circumstances, it is not surprising how poorly the book was reviewed. Howe's polemic against Matthiessen was typical. He stressed that Matthiessen was not simply an intellectual that was out of touch with reality. Using Matthiessen's own word against him, Howe noted that "he recognizes that the Soviet State takes the position that thought can be dangerous." But the closest that Matthiessen could come to condemnation of Soviet policy was to warn Stalin that "censorship was bad for morale."<sup>51</sup> For Howe the root of Matthiessen's political myopia was obvious – he was simply subordinating his critical sense to perceived political necessities. Howe declared that in "the name of socialism Matthiessen is ready to acquiesce, does in fact acquiesce to the most brutal political behavior."<sup>52</sup> Despite what he described as the author's misleading "sentimentality," Howe believed that Matthiessen's suppression of his critical and artistic, not to mention liberal, sensibilities was a deliberate Machiavellian calculation. To drive home this point, Howe went so far as to link Matthiessen to the Eastern European communists who were actively collaborating with the Soviet Union to extinguish democracy in their homelands. "I could not help thinking," Howe apocalyptically concluded, "that if some of us ever end our days in a 'corrective labor camp' it might well be because of the equally good intentions of intellectuals like F.O. Matthiessen."<sup>53</sup>

Trilling, though, made a much more subtle argument. In contrast to the cruder Cold War line of reasoning against progressive criticism, he saw the bad politics – for

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 1126.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 1127.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 1129.

example, Dreiser's support of the Communist party in his last years – as a product of the failure of liberals to develop good critical taste. This failure was for Trilling indicative of the failure to think deeply, whether it was about aesthetic standards or the real-world implications of utopian ideology. Again, Trilling understood this problem as fundamentally psychological. Therefore, when Chase described Matthiessen as “self-divided,” he was following Trilling's conception of what laid at the root of the political misjudgments of the American left. Matthiessen was not just following the party line. He was double minded, a kind of schizophrenic, in that there were two Matthiessens: one who exhibited superb critical taste and another who abandoned all reason and embraced an abstract and dubious utopian goal because it provided psychological comfort. In Chase and Trilling's view, Matthiessen embodied in a single individual all that was wrong, and all that could be right in terms of taste, about American intellectuals over the past half century. Matthiessen's failure was for Trilling and Chase the failure of most American intellectuals (and perhaps most Americans) – a pathological inability to achieve genuine psychological self-awareness and mastery. The fact that Matthiessen was a troubled, and often ambivalent, homosexual only reinforced in the minds of Chase and Trilling their belief lack of self-knowledge and maturity lay at the root of political alienation.

Chase's time at the Kenyon School of English was pregnant with ideological implications. In many ways, Chase was Trilling's point man for his program to connect sophisticated aesthetic criticism with a complex moral and political outlook. The disagreement with Matthiessen was particularly intense, but the Trilling/Chase criticism was in conflict with all of the New Critics. While they sympathized with Trilling's desire

to improve literary tastes, the New Critics could not accept Trilling's understanding of literary criticism as an essential part of political discourse. As Chase explained to Frances the New Critics did not seem terribly concerned with the real world. At the same time, the New Critics did not quite know what to make of Trilling. Matthiessen, of course, was prepared to think the worse of Trilling. He told Chase that Trilling was the leader of the "New Genteel Tradition," and by implication part of the vanguard of a new reactionary movement in America.<sup>54</sup> The other Kenyon School fellows were more diplomatic. Tate described Trilling as the "one of the best essayists in America," but he nevertheless dismissed Freudian literary criticism, and confessed that he could not even finish Trilling's novel.<sup>55</sup> Ransom was more generous, describing Trilling, and other New York critics, as "Pragmatic or Cultural critics" concerned "with the relation of art to culture."<sup>56</sup> One can easily get the impression that Ransom's relationship with Trilling was something of an alliance of convenience and that overall the New Critics were very wary of the more politically ambitious aspects of Trilling's program. While they were more concerned with developing a form of professional criticism that could serve the academy, Trilling had a more socially active role for the literary critic – that is, as a moral arbitrator that informed contemporary politics.

Despite the ideological differences between Trilling and Chase and the New Critics, their conflict should not be overstated. In practice, aside from Matthiessen, everyone got along well with one another. Chase found his time at the Kenyon School very congenial. While he may not have agreed with their take on politics and criticism, he found the other fellows delightful company. In fact he was quite charmed by them.

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<sup>54</sup> Richard Chase to Lionel Trilling, July 3, 1948.

<sup>55</sup> Richard Chase to Frances Chase, July 3 [1948].

<sup>56</sup> Richard Chase to Frances Chase, July 8, [1948]; Richard Chase to Lionel Trilling, July 17, 1948.

He described eccentric William Empson as “the star of the show,” a kind of “Lawrence of Arabia of the New Criticism, an academic Wingate of Burma,” with “horrible black flashing eyes” and a menacing two prong beard.<sup>57</sup> As for the southerners, Chase liked Ransom immediately, seeing him as “sedate and patriarchal,” the embodiment of a southern gentleman. Tate, in contrast, was a kind of charming “rake,” the bad boy of the New Critics.<sup>58</sup> Despite his substantial disagreement with Tate, Chase got along well with him, and they developed a “skirmishing and jollifying attitude toward each other.”<sup>59</sup> Chase also got along well with the drama critic Eric Bentley, something that surprised him. Chase had found himself in a conflict with Bentley some four years earlier, when he reviewed Bentley’s book, *A Century of Hero-Worship*. Bentley took exception to the review and sent a note to Chase accusing him of confusing political disagreements with moral conflicts.<sup>60</sup> Despite this history, Chase was pleasantly surprised to find that Bentley and his wife were extraordinarily gracious, and socialized with them throughout the summer. Chase reported to Trilling that he liked Bentley much better than he had “thought from his writings.”<sup>61</sup>

Overall, Chase was quite taken by the New Critics. While he never wavered from his own approach to criticism, he understood their position. They were, after all, a considerable improvement on what preceded them, Chase reasoned. He believed that their attention to text was “a fine thing and we need more of it.” And that they did teach

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<sup>57</sup> Richard Chase to Lionel Trilling, July 3, 1948.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Richard Chase to Frances Chase, August 1, 1948, Box 3a, Richard Chase Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

<sup>60</sup> Bentley to Richard Chase, 6 November 1948? This letter is incorrectly dated 1948, but it clearly from 1944.

<sup>61</sup> Richard Chase to Lionel Trilling, August 9, 1948.

people how to really read “anything harder than Time magazine.”<sup>62</sup> By the end of the summer, Chase even began to sympathize with their politics. Once he was assured that they were not really feudal reactionaries, Chase agreed with them that capitalism did not have the “power of establishing any kind of coherent culture in which individual life can have any meaning, manner, art, morality, purpose, etc.” He only disagreed with their adherence to a religious dogma.<sup>63</sup> In fact, Chase’s infatuation with the southern critics was so severe that Irving Howe felt that he had to remind Chase about some of the uglier aspects of southern culture. Although he agreed with Chase that southerners seem to have a better sense of poetry than northerners, Howe told his friend that while he was in the army, he found the average southerner he encountered “had less sympathy, less pity, which one needs for others and oneself in the army, than most northerners.”<sup>64</sup>

Howe was referring to the average uneducated southerner. Chase, on the other hand, had been exposed to the easy refined and agreeable manners of the southern (and to an extent, British) aristocracy. The effortlessness in which Tate, Ransom, Bentley, and the others, moved from scholarly intellectual discourse to formal and informal social relations must have presented a stark contrast with the often abrasive and intensely intellectual environment of New York City with which Chase was familial. It seems that the atmosphere at Kenyon was a respite for him. Chase, even though he had been a professor for over a year, had won a Guggenheim, and had his dissertation accepted for publication, was still unsure of his intellectual capacity. He confided to his wife that he was “only a part-time intellectual – not one of these perpetual motion brains like Lionel’s

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<sup>62</sup> Richard Chase to Frances Chase, July 18, [1948].

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Howe to Richard Chase, 13 October 1948, Box 2, Richard Chase Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

or Bentley's or Empson's." "Most of the time," he added, "I haven't an articulate thought in my head. I'm as much like my brother Oswald [an officer in the Navy] as I am Lionel Trilling."<sup>65</sup> It seems that Chase was somewhat "double-minded" himself, still not quite sure if he was suitable for his chosen vocation as an intellectual, or for that matter, if the vocation was even healthy. He was convinced that the "intellect does damage to the unconscious and the body," and "ruins and wastes these emotive and physical depths."<sup>66</sup> It appears that the Kenyon School of English reconciled, at least partially, these conflicting feelings in Chase and helped him refine his criticism.

It also seems that his fellowship at Kenyon helped him get a job at Columbia University. Marian Janssen, in her history of the *Kenyon Review*, attributes a "mixture of worldly and spiritual benefits" helping to advance the careers of the school's staff.<sup>67</sup> It was no doubt a factor in Columbia's hiring of Chase, but it was mainly due to the constant lobbying on his behalf made by Trilling that assured his position. It is impossible to understate Trilling's influence on Chase at this time. He was not only directing Chase's career, he was still Chase's most important intellectual influence at this time. Although he may have been exposed to the New Critics at Kenyon, and found most of them agreeable fellows, Chase never wavered in his confidence in Trilling's superiority. As Chase explained to his wife, when comparing Trilling to the New Critics: "As usual Lionel gets an A and the rest get a B."<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Richard Chase to Frances Chase, July 20, [1948], Box 3a, Richard Chase Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Janssen, *The Kenyon Review, 1939-1970*, 168.

<sup>68</sup> Richard Chase to Frances Chase, July 18, [1948].

## CHAPTER SIX

### **The Combative Mr. Chase**

Lionel Trilling lobbied Columbia University's English department for a position for his protégé for over a year. Unfortunately, the department was reluctant to hire Chase. In November 1947, Trilling asked Chase if he wanted a job at Columbia, but he warned that it could not be guaranteed and that Chase ought to consider a recent offer from California.<sup>1</sup> By the fall of 1948, however, the position at Columbia was secure. Surprisingly, it appears that Chase considered refusing the job. Although he conceded that there were good financial and professional reasons to return to Columbia, Chase was reluctant to reenter the New York intellectual scene. Perhaps he found the genteel atmosphere at Kenyon, as well as the slower pace of life afforded by his position at Connecticut College, more attractive than the frantic atmosphere of New York. Chase told his mentor that he yearned for the "provincial and the rural" and was hesitant to return to the intensity of city life.<sup>2</sup> Although he eventually accepted the position, Chase insisted that he must be "able to escape" on occasion, for "New York has long since organized itself beyond the point where I could live there." He was reminded of Melville, who fled from the city in 1849, and rhetorically asked Trilling: "Is there really

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<sup>1</sup> Lionel Trilling to Richard Chase, 27 Nov. 1947, Box 2, Richard Chase Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

<sup>2</sup> Lionel Trilling to Richard Chase, 2 Oct. 1948, Box 2, Richard Chase Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

any useful intellectual community in New York, or did the whole possibility disappear decades ago?"<sup>3</sup>

Despite his trepidation, Chase accepted the offer from Columbia in early December 1948.<sup>4</sup> The one concession that he made to his desire for the "rural and the provincial" was to move to suburban New Jersey rather than New York City proper. Yet even before he moved at the end of August 1949, Chase immersed himself in the intellectual life of the city about which he had such ambivalent feelings. In a sense, he never really left New York and the intense infighting among its intellectuals. In the summer of 1948 Chase was taken at Kenyon College to be a representative of a Trilling faction, and despite his exile in New London, Chase maintained a conspicuous, and very partisan, presence in the prevailing journals of opinion. However, in the spring of 1949, Chase became more than one of many partisan intellectuals; he injected himself in the center of the controversy over defining the role of the literary critic and defining the very meaning of liberalism itself. In many ways, he acted as Lionel Trilling's point man, militantly promoting his mentor's anti-radical modernist program.

For the past year, Chase had been working to finish the manuscript of his second book, *Herman Melville*. As early as May 1947, Chase had sketched out in a *Partisan Review* article the outline of his project.<sup>5</sup> It was a combination of Chase's own myth criticism and Trilling's anti-progressive critique. Chase's incorporation of Trilling's criticism was only partly successful. He utilized Trilling's critique of progressive criticism to good effect when he described how previous critics were too focused on the

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Chase to Lionel Trilling, Oct 12, [1948], Box 2, Lionel Trilling Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Chase to Lionel Trilling, December 4 [1948], Box 2, Lionel Trilling Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Chase, "An Approach to Melville," *Partisan Review* 14 (May-June, 1947): 285-294.

image of Melville as a “Heroic Failure,” who was frustrated with a vulgar and commercial America that overlooked his genius. This was, at best, according to Chase, a rough caricature of the author and ignored Melville’s true art. On the other hand, Chase’s political agenda often struck a discordant note and gave the impression of being forced, such as when he described Melville’s novel, *The Confidence Man*, as the story of a “false Prometheus” and “a do-gooder, a Progressive in fact.”<sup>6</sup> This sort of anachronistic reading was typical of Chase’s work during this time and illustrates the way that he often went out of his way to provoke political confrontations.

By the fall of 1948, the manuscript for *Herman Melville* was completed with the approval of Lionel Trilling.<sup>7</sup> Over the summer, Chase had refined his criticism but he did not tone down its militancy. Beginning with an analysis of *Billy Budd*, Chase used his work as a weapon against what he described as the “liberal-progressive” worldview. In an article in the November 1948 issue of *Partisan Review*, Chase disagreed with the commonly accepted judgment that *Billy Budd* was one of Melville’s finest works.<sup>8</sup> While Chase admitted that the novel was a fine piece of writing, he did not see it as Melville’s “definitive moral statement.” That, Chase insisted, was made in *Moby Dick*, *The Confidence Man*, and *Clarel*. The problem was that the character of Billy Budd was too underdeveloped. Chase noted that in contrast with other novels where Melville utilized the archetypal character of the “handsome sailor,” such as Marboo in *Typee*, Jack Chase in *White-Jacket*, Bulkington in *Moby Dick*, and Ethan Allen in *Israel Potter*, Billy Budd is remarkably shallow. He merely projected the image of innocence, where the other

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.: 293.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Chase to Lionel Trilling, September 4, 1948, Box 2, Lionel Trilling Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Chase, “Dissent on Billy Budd,” *Partisan Review* 15 (November, 1948), 1212-1218.

characters display a tragic sense of reality and a Promethean desire to do right. There seems to be no depth of intelligence in Billy Budd. Indeed, as Chase noted, it is Billy Budd's inarticulateness -- his inability to respond to the charges against him -- that leads to his tragedy. Instead of the personification of the righteous man, Chase saw Billy Budd more akin to the contemporary image of the "common man," the "beatified boy of the liberal-progressive myth," who gets "pushed around" and "to whom things happen."<sup>9</sup> Billy Budd is like this "common man," in that Billy is not only a victim of circumstances that he has no control over, he also has little understanding, or even awareness, of these circumstances. This, Chase argued, is in stark contrast to the other "innocent" characters of Melville. In *Clarel*, the great author described genuine innocence as "the act of the true heart reflecting upon evil." Billy Budd, in contrast, does not reflect upon anything; he only selflessly and instinctively sacrifices himself. For Chase, Billy's sacrifice is a death "without moral content." Thus the novel *Billy Budd* is a flawed parable that fails to explore the true nature of evil. Chase concluded that although "Melville is possibly our greatest critic of the liberal-progressive ethos," this is "in spite of Billy Budd."<sup>10</sup>

Although provocative, Chase's declaration that Melville was a great critic of the "liberal-progressive ethos" was not in itself extraordinarily controversial at the time. Furthermore, Chase's underlying thesis that a character in an unpublished and incomplete novel was underdeveloped was hardly remarkable. What drew special attention to Chase's article was his description of the villain of *Billy Budd*, Claggart, as another version of Melville's "self-righteous Liberal, the Confidence Man." Claggart, according to Chase, is the Confidence Man "invested with 'natural depravity' willed by paranoiac

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 1218.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

guile and controlled by superior intellect.” He is “citized,” or so highly civilized that he has developed a “compensatory vision of Innocence.” Billy Budd’s attractiveness, popularity and especially his “harmlessness,” trigger both desire and revulsion in Claggart. The only way to resolve these deeply conflicted feelings is to annihilate Billy Budd. Chase pointed out that for “a man with Claggart’s guile and facility with language, he merely has to enunciate his charge [of mutiny] and his case is won.”<sup>11</sup>

Chase was trying to make a comparison between Claggart’s machinations against Billy Budd and Stalinism, or more precisely those liberals who use their position as intellectuals to act as apologists for Stalinism. Unfortunately, Chase’s critique is both blunt and strangely oblique. He did not differentiate between liberalism and Stalinism, nor did he explicitly explain what his critique had to do with contemporary issues. Instead, he broadly attacked “liberalism” and insinuated that liberals were fundamentally dishonest. The essay also reads as very strained criticism. Chase’s description of Claggart as a liberal seems to come out of nowhere. In contrast to his critique of the character of Billy Budd, Chase’s analysis of Claggart does not follow naturally from a reading of the novel. Indeed, the whole characterization of Claggart seems to be a deliberate, and somewhat malicious, attack upon his fellow literary critics.

And in many ways it was. Chase’s criticism at this time contained a broad attack on his fellow critics that went beyond, and was far more aggressive, than Trilling’s critique of “progressive” sensibilities. Another instance of this is found in a brief article reviewing *The Times of Melville and Whitman* by Van Wyck Brooks, where Chase attacked what he called the “ordealist” school of criticism.<sup>12</sup> By using the word ordealist,

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.: 1216.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Chase, “The Times of Brooks and Gorer,” *Sewanee Review* 56 (1948), 703-706.

Chase was referring to what he understood as the superficial dichotomy used by literary critics between the “artist” and the “world.” It seemed to Chase that too many American critics focused on the alienation of artists from society and the “ordeal” that life appeared to present to them. Instead of illuminating literature, Chase asserted that this technique reduced criticism to “the study of suffering and failure” and ignored the actual work of the artist. Thus differentiation between the quality of various works is impossible.

“Melville is reduced to the stature of Jack London and Mark Twain to the stature of Artemus Ward,” wrote Chase.<sup>13</sup> Ordealism ignored the aesthetic qualities of a book and was incapable of recognizing the complex moral points of the writer. Chase further argued that the idea of ordealism was a popular trope. He pointed out that Newton Arvin’s “otherwise excellent book on Hawthorne” was marred by the ordealist paradigm. “After attributing to Hawthorne the belief that ‘all that isolates, damns; all that associates saves,’” observed Chase, “Mr. Arvin stated that spiritual isolation was a universal American characteristic – which left one to conclude that all that isolates associates and damns, and saves.”<sup>14</sup>

It seems that that the anti-radicalism that Chase had acquired from Trilling both inspired and distracted Chase. While Trilling’s skepticism toward the literary criticism of the past two decades led Chase to constructively reevaluate neglected works of fiction, his aggressive political polemic often overwhelmed his otherwise insightful analysis. A good example of this is an essay by Chase on Herman Melville’s *The Confidence Man*.<sup>15</sup> Encouraged by Trilling’s critique of progressive criticism, Chase believed that this work was misunderstood by the critics of the previous generation. These critics regarded *The*

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 706.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 705-706.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Chase, "Melville's Confidence Man," *The Kenyon Review* 11 (Winter, 1949), 122-140.

*Confidence Man* as a deeply pessimistic and flawed work that was at odds with the prevailing optimism of nineteenth-century American culture. Chase saw it differently. He used his knowledge of American folklore and mythological symbolism to reveal that Melville drew upon a well-established American folk character for the image of the confidence man. Chase identified this persona with the popular nineteenth century stage character of the peddler, Brother Jonathan – “the uncouth, rustic, apparently naïve but really sharp and witty American.” Eventually, Brother Jonathan’s image merged with the popular conception of Uncle Sam.<sup>16</sup> Thus, in contrast with critics such as Van Wyck Brooks, who described the work as laborious and opaque, Chase saw *The Confidence Man* as a vivid satire that was profoundly relevant not only to nineteenth-century America, but to contemporary society as well.<sup>17</sup>

Chase wonderfully summarized the encounters, in the story, of the many-faced Confidence Man with the passengers of a Mississippi steamboat on an April Fool’s Day. In doing so, Chase illustrated that Melville had a firm grasp of the various archetypal characters that made up the young American nation. He also showed that Melville understood that the creative figure of his books – “the Promethean figure” – had a negative counterpart. “The confidence man,” Chase argued, “is a bogus peddler of the divine creative *élan*, a smooth-talking Prometheus in a loud American suit.”<sup>18</sup> The Confidence Man goes about the steamboat convincing various Americans of the inevitability of progress, the efficiency of machines, the superiority of men over machines, on the goodness of humanity, or whatever it takes to dupe his subject out of a few coins. It is a great story and an insightful depiction of American culture. *The*

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>17</sup> Van Wyck Brooks, *The Times of Melville and Whitman*, (New York, 1953), 171.

<sup>18</sup> Chase, “Melville’s Confidence Man,” 129.

*Confidence Man* was not a failed work of an author who had reached his “nadir,” but rather the product of a writer who was, as Chase described Melville, “a vigorous, incisive moralist who was achieving a new style and who found as much pleasure as he did disgust in American folkways.” The novel was in Chase’s estimation, Melville’s “second-best achievement,” and it established him as a “great moral intelligence.”<sup>19</sup>

The book, however, was filled with ambiguities, as the literary critic, Leslie Fiedler, pointed out to Chase. While Fiedler agreed that the book was noteworthy and misunderstood, he found that Chase’s analysis of the character of the Confidence Man was simply “not possible.”<sup>20</sup> What bothered Fiedler was Chase’s insistence that the Confidence Man can be seen as a depiction of the contemporary American liberal. Fiedler understood the confidence man as an ambivalent trickster, who duped his marks of their money but also restored their sense of hope. In contrast, Chase saw the confidence man in only negative terms. “The work of the Confidence Man,” he argued, “is to destroy moral distinctions, to keep our fallible minds from making choices.”<sup>21</sup> For Chase, the ability of the Confidence Man to appear to believe sincerely any side of an issue, indeed his very “confidence,” was not a product of a peddler’s mentality, but rather a symptom of the great moral failure of American liberalism – its incapability for “self-knowledge.” “When Melville calls the Confidence Man ‘moderate,’” explained Chase, “he means to denounce him for this failure of consciousness and responsibility.” Along with Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance* and James’s *The Princess Cassimassima*,

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 135-136.

<sup>20</sup> Leslie Fiedler to R. Chase, 30 January 1949, Box 1 - Catalogued Correspondence, Richard Chase Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

<sup>21</sup> Chase, “Melville’s Confidence Man,” 137.

*The Confidence Man* was, according to Chase, another example of a penetrating critique of the “well-meaning reformer” that has been deliberately neglected by liberal critics.

Chase’s essay on *The Confidence Man* is interesting and insightful. He makes an excellent case that this strange, ambivalent, and fascinating story had been woefully neglected by critics. If Chase had simply confined himself to an analysis of Melville’s work, his critique, while still innovative, would not have been so inflammatory. However, Chase allowed his political agenda to dominate his aesthetic sensibilities. He insisted that *The Confidence Man* could tell us about not only the misguided optimistic reformer of the 1850s, but also about misguided liberal of the 1940s. Indeed, in his writings from this period, Chase used the term “Confidence Man” interchangeably with the terms “liberal” or “progressive.” In Chase’s mind, his rehabilitation of Melville’s story had profound implications. “We realize,” he wrote, “that liberalism tends to commit suicide by reducing itself to a stance of rectitude, a bondage to the absolute, or a mechanism for denying the necessity to think and feel.” If liberalism was to overcome its “fantastic underestimation of the conditions of survival in the modern world,” it must develop a “lively faculty of self criticism.” For Chase, a correct reading of *The Confidence Man* was instrumental in the development of this self-criticism. He went so far as to declare that for the new enlightened and self-critical liberal, “*The Confidence Man* ought to be scripture.”<sup>22</sup>

This hyperbolic and combative style dominated Chase’s criticism. In a review of several books about Hawthorne, including *The Portable Hawthorne*, edited by Malcolm Cowley, Chase lacerated the work of several authors.<sup>23</sup> In addition to ridiculing the

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 139-140.

<sup>23</sup> Richard Chase, “The Progressive Hawthorne,” *Partisan Review* 16 (January, 1949), 96-97.

concept of the “portable” as a form of middlebrow vulgarity, Chase made a very personal attack against Cowley’s politics. Chase began with the not unreasonable criticism that Cowley’s assertion that Hawthorne intended *The Blithedale Romance* as a “socially realistic” novel was an anachronistic reading that imposed the sensibilities of the early twentieth-century progressives on a nineteenth-century author. But Chase did not limit his critique to a proper contextualization of Hawthorne’s work and literary intent. He continued by linking Cowley’s flawed reading to the defects in what Chase understood as contemporary liberal-progressive orthodoxy. “The most common cliché about Hawthorne,” wrote Chase, “is that he thought solitude a crime and believed in the brotherhood of man and in man’s dependency on society.” Although this may be “good liberal doctrine,” it was, according to Chase, “such a vaporous idea that you cannot imagine a serious writer of fiction worrying about it.” Instead, argued Chase, Hawthorne was interested in “social fraud.” Thus his villains “are guilty of fraudulently involving themselves with other human beings without accepting the tragic moral implications of the involvement.” From Chase’s perspective, Cowley seemed deliberately to ignore or at least twist this theme. He cited as an example Cowley’s assertion that Hawthorne’s villains “might be taught human brotherhood by their very crimes and, if they publicly confessed, might be taken back into the community.” Chase provocatively described this analysis as endowing the great author’s “morality with a kind of Moscow-Trials legalism.”<sup>24</sup>

For Chase, the problem was that Cowley and other modern liberal readers of Hawthorne were not able to appreciate the psychological depth of the author, nor could they comprehend how Hawthorne understood the concept of evil. Instead, they

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 97.

frequently resorted to dismissing Hawthorne as a writer “obsessed” with “sin and theology” who “approached a Roman Catholic outlook.” “If you do not understand the great writer,” Chase sarcastically wrote, “or discern the possible range of liberal intelligence, or see how he makes darksome moral and cultural realities out of theology and everything else, you assume that he must be a prodigious expert in evil and Roman Catholicism. (Thus progressive critics always say that Melville’s white whale represents Evil.)”<sup>25</sup> The difficulty was that the liberal-progressive mindset prevented the reader from transcending the rather narrow political confines of his or her imagination. While conceding that Cowley may be better than Parrington, Chase accused him, and other contemporary critics and scholars of Hawthorne, of nevertheless “falling victim” to the “fallacies of modern progressivism,” misunderstanding, and almost willfully misrepresenting the themes and priorities of antebellum American literature.<sup>26</sup>

This is precisely what Trilling had been arguing for some time, albeit in a more sedate and less confrontational manner. When Trilling claimed in 1940 that there was a “chronic American belief that there exists an opposition between reality and mind and that one must enlist oneself in the party of reality,” he was making the same argument that Chase was making some eight years later – that American critics were reluctant to employ too much imagination in the fear that they would stray too far from basic liberal assumptions about the nature of society and its relation to art.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, just as Chase did in his description of the “ordealist” school of criticism, Trilling attacked the notion that an author in some way had to separate himself from society in order to instruct it properly. He explained that “although our culture says that the artist is a

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 99-100.

<sup>27</sup> Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, 10.

subversive idler, it is nowadays just as likely to say that he is to be admired for his innocence, for his activity is conceived as having no end beyond itself except possibly some benign social purpose, such as ‘teaching people to understand each other.’”<sup>28</sup> However, Trilling’s argument was conducted with more diplomacy than Chase’s criticism. While his protégé openly attacked his fellow critics, Trilling confined his worst comments to the dead, such as Parrington and Dreiser, and dealt with contemporary writers with a great deal of finesse. Despite this public difference between the two men, privately Trilling approved of Chase’s style and to a large degree expected the controversy that eventually surrounded his former student. Chase warned Trilling before the publication of his review of Cowley’s Hawthorne book that it was a “fairly bloody review” and that it would convince the everyone that Chase was either “a genius” or a strange, and presumably reactionary, mystic.<sup>29</sup> When the expected reaction materialized, the two men carefully planned their responses.

The reaction came in February 1949. In a letter to the *Partisan Review*, three professors from Smith College – Newton Arvin, Robert Gorham Davis, and Daniel Aaron – protested Chase’s use of the terms “progressive” and “liberal.”<sup>30</sup> The letter began with a general complaint about how “anti-liberal” and “anti-progressive” critics were denuding these terms of any positive significance by using them out of context and as “emotive signs for intellectual inanity and political immaturity.” The Smith College professors went on to name Chase specifically as one of the worse perpetrators of this rhetorical vandalism. Citing his essay on *Billy Budd* and the description of the villain Claggart as a

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 77-78.

<sup>29</sup> Richard Chase to Lionel Trilling, 22 September, 1948, Box 2, Lionel Trilling Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

<sup>30</sup> Newton Arvin, Robert Gorham Davis, and Daniel Aaron, "Correspondence: Liberalism and Confusion," *Partisan Review* 16 (February, 1949), 221-222.

“self-righteous liberal,” the letter asked the readers of *Partisan Review*: “Are we to gather that liberalism has become interchangeable with Natural Depravity? Was Iago a progressive? Did Count Cenci take a ‘liberal line’?”<sup>31</sup> Moving on to Chase’s review of Cowley’s Hawthorne book, the writers expressed their irritation over Chase’s description of the “common cliché about Hawthorne,” that the author condemned solitude, as “good liberal doctrine.” They asked, what was the true meaning of this sarcastic characterization of an idea that could have also been described as “Platonic” or “Pauline,” or associated with any number of philosophies that could be characterized as non-liberal, or even anti-liberal? According to the Smith College professors, Chase had crossed a line between thoughtful political and literary commentary to an “extreme semantic laxity” that distracted from his literary criticism while adding nothing but “straw men” to the discussion concerning “democratic liberalism.”<sup>32</sup>

Chase’s reply did not concede one point to the professors. When describing Hawthorne’s alleged belief in man’s “dependency on society,” he insisted that he was simply “attacking a pious cliché.” Chase mockingly added that the “true idea that ‘we are members one of another’ need not be defended from the gentlemen at Smith College, since in common with many modern liberals they believe that all men are members of one another, *except liberals*.” The italics were Chase’s and reflected a dark insinuation that liberals -- that is, really the radical left -- had cut themselves off from the general community to set themselves up as a progressive, perhaps revolutionary, elite that could act as ultimate arbiter of what constitutes politically useful criticism. “If, as I hope,” Chase concluded, “our skeptical, secular liberalism is to survive, it must be a

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 222.

comprehensive, sharp, and open view of life, not simply an acceptable stance vis-à-vis certain moral and political issues. Perhaps Messrs. Arvin, Davis and Aaron agree with this in principle. Let's hope, however, that the Confidence Man of the 1940's has not turned out to be the Liberal Who Has Officially Reassessed Liberalism And Found It Good [sic]."<sup>33</sup>

The readers of the *Partisan Review* understood the sub-textual allusions made by Chase. The three Smith professors were known as active members of the political left. Arvin, the senior member of the trio, was a well-established and respected critic and scholar of nineteenth-century American literature. His devotion to left-wing causes was also well known. Although he was never a member of the Communist Party, Arvin was, since the 1920s, a prominent American socialist. At the time that the letter appeared, Arvin was caught-up in the political controversy surrounding the artist and writer's colony of Yaddo, near Saratoga Springs, New York. In the early 1900s, Yaddo had been set-up as a nonprofit corporation by the Trask family as retreat for artists and scholars. Arvin had been going there regularly since 1928 and found it an idyllic place to work.<sup>34</sup> But in February 1949, the tranquility of Yaddo was broken by a report that named one of the residents, Agnes Smedley, as a Soviet agent. Arvin and other long-time residents, including Malcolm Cowley and Granville Hicks, found themselves under a shadow of suspicion.<sup>35</sup> Although Yaddo would survive the Red Scare, many, including the anti-communist left, considered those associated with the institution fellow travelers. Davis and Aaron were young, relatively unknown professors, but their left-wing credentials were also well established. Davis had been a member of the Communist Party and would

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<sup>33</sup> Richard Chase, "Reply," *Partisan Review* 16 (February, 1949): 223.

<sup>34</sup> Barry Werth, *The Scarlet Professor*, (New York, 2001), 41-42.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 114-116.

later cooperate in 1953 with HUAC by naming Granville Hicks and Daniel Boorstin as fellow members.<sup>36</sup> Aaron was also a veteran of the radical movement and expressed through his scholarly work his antipathy for what he saw as the anti-progressive tone that literary discourse in the United States was taking. At the time that the letter to *Partisan Review* appeared, he was working on a book, *Men of Good Hope* (1951), that he described as “an attempt to rehabilitate the progressive tradition, currently under attack by both liberals and anti-liberals, and to show that progressivism was not always the shabby thing it is now made out to be.”<sup>37</sup> In contrast to most of the studies of progressivism produced during the fifties, *Men of Good Hope* presented an idealized and highly favorable account of American progressive thought.

Thus, the letter from the Smith professors was a political document. There was more at stake than simply a critique of Chase’s overheated rhetoric. It represented a challenge to the anti-radical tide that was emanating from New York, and in particular Lionel Trilling. Arvin’s participation was especially significant. He not only was a senior scholar, he specialized in the very same subject matter as Richard Chase. Indeed, they would both publish a book on Herman Melville within a year of each other. Arvin was therefore not just defending his politics; he was trying to prevent his field from being contaminated by what he considered an anti-radical agenda that not only impugned his life-long political commitment but also was distorting literary history and critical tastes. Consequently, the letter by the Smith professors and Chase’s reply set off a firestorm of controversy. Chase expected that it would. When he first received a copy of the letter from *Partisan Review* for a reply, he immediately alerted Trilling of the attack. Chase

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 134-136.

<sup>37</sup> Daniel Aaron, *Men of Good Hope: A Story of American Progressives*, (New York, 1951), ix.

put it rather melodramatically when he depicted the criticism against him as the “Assyrian has come down out of the North with much slaughter.” He further explained that the “Assyrian is Arvin, Davis, and Daniel Aaron of Smith, who have gotten off a long letter to PR about contemporary reassessment of liberal-progressivism, saying that they like much of it but that it grows irresponsible, unrestrained and semantically lax in recent essays of Richard Chase on Billy Budd and Hawthorne. I am, they hint, the lunatic fringe and a horrible example.” Chase recognized that the letter was “good and serious,” but was angered by what he understood as instances of “big and mighty disingenuousness.” He assured Trilling that although he had taken “a hard punch” and had “sagged” a bit, he was confident that his response would “really put [him] on top.” Comparing his critics to the false sages who blamed Job for his troubles, he concluded, “Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar have told me that I must be a sinner else I would not have all these boils, and I have said thou art sanctimonious and do not wish to expose liberalism to these boils.”<sup>38</sup>

Given his reputation for serene manners, one might expect Trilling to caution his protégé to tone down his combativeness. This is not what happened. Trilling instructed his Chase to “strike back hard.” Alluding to their radical past, he told Chase that although the Smith professors “think of themselves as free and enlightened now, they were not a little while back.” Moreover, Trilling declared, the “old infection” was still in the “blood” and that they were now “severely embittered.” Davis and Arvin (he did not know Aaron personally) were in his estimation “nice good men but thin,” and Davis in particular could not be trusted. As for Chase’s confrontational style, Trilling reassured

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<sup>38</sup> Richard Chase to Lionel Trilling, January 12 [1949], Box 2, Lionel Trilling Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

him that the “Hawthorne review was very good” and that its relaxed tone – some might say, arrogant – displayed “authority and spiritedness.”<sup>39</sup>

While Chase and Trilling expected that the controversy would not end with a reply to the Smith professors, they were somewhat taken aback by the response of their most demanding and effective critics. One of these was Irving Howe. Howe was not a doctrinaire anticommunist. At the time, he was engaged in a running feud with Sidney Hook over whether or not known communists should be allowed to teach in American colleges and universities. However, as his criticism of Matthiessen’s memoir of Eastern Europe demonstrated, he was vehemently against any displays of sympathy for the Soviet regime and condemned all who gave any appearance of rationalizing its behavior.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, in 1949 Howe was on very good terms with Lionel Trilling, who was at the time helping him publish a book on Sherwood Anderson. Howe also hoped that Trilling would help him find a permanent academic position.<sup>41</sup> Yet, as he explained some thirty years later, Howe detected in Trilling an alarming “passivity even quietism” and feared that Trilling sought to “dissuade people” from “militant politics in behalf of both social reform and a measure of egalitarianism,” which, despite his own anticommunism, he remained firmly committed to throughout his life.<sup>42</sup>

Given Howe’s dedication to progressive politics, it was inevitable that he would find himself in opposition to Trilling. Howe, though, never considered Trilling simply another crude red-baiter. On the contrary, he always admired Trilling and described him

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<sup>39</sup> Lionel Trilling to Richard Chase, not dated [February/March, 1949], Box 2, Richard Chase Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

<sup>40</sup> Howe, "The Sentimental Fellow-Traveling of F.O. Matthiessen," 1125-1129.

<sup>41</sup> Irving Howe to Lionel Trilling, March 7, 1949, Box 3, Lionel Trilling Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

<sup>42</sup> Howe, *A Margin of Hope: An Intellectual Autobiography*, 229-231.

as “the most subtle and perhaps most influential mind” during the 1950s.<sup>43</sup> But Howe recognized that Trilling was a leader in an anti-radical movement that was far more subtle and yet potentially more dangerous than the one that was emanating from intellectuals like Hook and dedicated liberal anti-communist journals such as *Commentary* (and to a lesser extent *Partisan Review*). He understood that unlike Hook, Trilling sought to create a discursive framework that all but made radical thought impossible. Howe was polite but firm. He wrote to Trilling warning him that he had just written a “Magazine Chronicle” for *Partisan Review* that was critical of Trilling, Chase, and others that Howe associated with this intellectually more substantial anti-radical moment. Howe objected to the way they were marginalizing the concept of alienation and by implication questioning the legitimacy of an avant-garde. Trying to reassure his friend that this disagreement was not personal, he told Trilling that at first he “hesitated on the grounds of my feeling for both you and Chase,” but then it occurred to him “that the insult then would be not to express disagreement because of that feeling.”<sup>44</sup>

Despite his reluctance, Howe did not hold back any criticism in the article.<sup>45</sup> In many ways the piece was more substantial, and more damning, than the angry letter from the Smith professors. It contained not only an account of Chase’s transgressions, but also a detailed description of how Chase’s anti-radicalism was becoming typical of contemporary literary criticism. The article began with a critique of Chase’s essay on Brooks and “ordealism.” Howe quickly dismissed Chase’s idea that by noting the alienation of the artist, the critic relinquished the ability to engage in aesthetic criticism.

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>44</sup> Irving Howe to Lionel Trilling, February 21, 1949, Box 3, Lionel Trilling Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

<sup>45</sup> Howe, “Magazine Chronicle,” 416-427.

Instead, Howe argued that alienation was not simply the invention of literary critics, but that it was, rather, a “statement of historical description subject to empirical tests.”<sup>46</sup>

Unlike the professors from Smith College, Howe linked Chase’s anti-historicist view with Lionel Trilling. He surmised that Chase had been influenced by a 1945 *Partisan Review* article, in which Trilling argued that the idea that the artist possessed a “special neurotic quality” was a consciously created myth. This was, Howe insisted, demonstrably false when it came to the concept of alienation in a “capitalistic society.”<sup>47</sup> For Howe, alienation was a politicized form of neurosis and was produced by oppressive social structures. To deny the reality and authenticity of alienation was, in his view, dangerously close to denying that the oppression felt by the individual in a capitalist society was real.

The article that Howe referred to was written by Trilling in response to an essay by Saul Rosenzweig that suggested that the source of Henry James’s genius was a profound neurosis.<sup>48</sup> Howe’s citation of this particular article was perceptive. Like most of Trilling’s work, the political polemic was camouflaged by a gracious acknowledgment to Rosenzweig in an essay that ostensibly focuses only upon literary criticism. Trilling brilliantly deconstructed the “myth” of the neurotic artist. He noted that although Freudianism is a useful tool for the analysis of literature, Freud was himself prone to a vulgar reductionism in his own reading of literature by simplifying it to a product -- or a “substitute gratification,” as he put it -- of a neurotic mind. Trilling argued that the founder of psychoanalysis was simply acting upon the prejudices of his class. By

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 416.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Saul Rosenzweig, "The Ghost of Henry James," *Partisan Review* 11 (Fall, 1944), 436-455; Lionel Trilling, "A Note on Art and Neurosis," *Partisan Review* 12 (Winter, 1945), 41-48.

following the common “bourgeois philistinism of the nineteenth century,” Freud echoed the genteel critic who insisted that art must celebrate the middle class virtues of regular hours, hard work, and conscientious citizenship, and to those “Vagrants of the Arts” who did not do this, should come “excommunication” from respectable society. Thus, Trilling explained, the myth of the neurotic, alienated, deviant, and “unhealthy” artist began. This characterization of the artist was not a timeless cliché. Trilling noted that poetry was held in such high esteem during the Renaissance that it was viewed as a virtue and as a “sign of manly completeness.”<sup>49</sup>

The central argument of Trilling’s criticism was that the idea of the alienated artist was not a trans-historical phenomenon; nor was it inevitable and natural that the artist should be estranged from the mainstream of society. However, Trilling had to admit the myth of this estrangement was powerful and persistent because it was not only promoted by a fastidious bourgeoisie, but by the artists as well. He noted that the Romantic poets, although they “were as proud of their art as the vaunting poets of the sixteenth century,” called for a separation from “this life of care,” and loudly proclaimed their desire for a child-like existence and, presumably, a child-like innocence. The myth of the neurotic artist therefore served the interests of both the artist and the audience. It gave the artist “the ancient privileges of the idiot and the fool, half prophetic creatures.” And it gave the audience the ability to “shut [their] ears to what the artist says.” Yet, as Trilling observed, it also allowed the bourgeois “philistine” to listen. “By supposing that the artist has an interesting but not always reliable relation to reality,” declared Trilling, “he is able to control and modify what he is told. If he did not want to listen at all he

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<sup>49</sup> Trilling, “A Note on Art and Neurosis,” 42.

would say ‘insane’; with ‘neurotic,’ which hedges, he can listen when he chooses.”<sup>50</sup>

Rosenzweig’s use of psychoanalysis, therefore, did not offer any real literary insight. Instead, it merely promoted the rather hackneyed myth of the artist divorced from reality. In fairness to his opponent, Trilling admitted that Rosenzweig did not argue that neurosis somehow invalidated Henry James’s work. On the contrary, Rosenzweig maintained that neurosis is but one way to deal with reality and it can provide useful insight. But Trilling insisted that Rosenzweig was making a critical error by suggesting that the artist finds “*strength* in his neurosis.” Unfortunately, this was, noted Trilling, an erroneous view that was shared by many other critics, including Edmund Wilson, who contended “that artistic effectiveness depends on emotional pain.”<sup>51</sup>

Trilling found this romantic idea of art stemming from pain and neurosis ridiculous. One of his objections was that the image of a neurotic artist was in a sense a meaningless truism. He pointed out that “it was the writer’s job to exhibit his unconscious.” What distinguished writers or artists from the rest of society were not their neuroses, but rather that they, by definition, publicly voiced their neuroses. Trilling claimed that the writer was not intrinsically any more neurotic than any other person. “It is the basic assumption of psychoanalysis,” he pointed out, “that the acts of *every* person are influenced by the forces of the unconscious.” Indeed, Trilling went so far as to assert that “we have most of society involved in neurosis,” and therefore it cannot “account for one man’s literary power.”<sup>52</sup> What then accounted for the power of the artist? For Trilling it was not their neurosis or alienation, which in the modern world was a common – perhaps even banal – condition, but their talent for self-expression. And to do this the

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 42-43.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 44-45.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 46-47.

artist had to overcome neurosis. “Of the whole artist,” concluded Trilling, “we may say that whatever elements of neurosis he has in common with all his fellow-citizens, the one part of him that is healthy, by any possible definition of health, is that which gives him the power to conceive, to plan, to work, and to bring his work to completion.”<sup>53</sup>

Although Trilling was writing specifically about neurosis, he was certainly alluding to the broader concept of alienation. His argument undermined the *raison d’être* of the avant-garde. For Trilling alienation was not the product of a dysfunctional social system – that is, capitalism – but rather it is simply an inevitable and unavoidable part of human existence in the modern world. Indeed, Trilling maintained throughout his career that the modern writer’s obsession with alienation and separation was a sign of immaturity, an infantile fixation that needed to be overcome through personal psychological growth.

While Trilling was the most prominent and persuasive promoter of this form of anti-radicalism, he and Chase were by no means the only critics that subscribed to this point of view. Howe cited in his “Magazine Chronicle” other critics whose essays more explicitly demonstrated the political ramifications of Trilling’s anti-radical criticism. One was William Arrowsmith, who, in *The Hudson Review*, attacked the “Freudian-Marxist” criticism that was emanating from the *Partisan Review*.<sup>54</sup> Arrowsmith was a firm devotee of the formalism associated with the New Critics and was inclined to see any criticism that combined politics with literature as vulgar. Furthermore, it is apparent from his essay that Arrowsmith had an explicitly conservative agenda. While he admitted that *Partisan Review* had fought the “good fight” against Stalinism, he suggested that the magazine’s editors, and most of its contributors, had gone too far, and

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>54</sup> William Arrowsmith, “Partisan Review and American Writing,” *The Hudson Review* 1 (1949), 526-536.

had become so obsessed with the subject of Stalinism that it affected their aesthetic sensibilities. Although it may sound odd for a conservative to condemn the anti-Stalinism of *Partisan Review*, Arrowsmith made it very clear why an obsession with the sectarian struggles of the left offended his critical sensibilities. He argued that the editors of *Partisan Review* had wrongly assumed that alienation necessarily characterizes the modern artist and that the nature of this alienation stems from, first, social estrangement from the political and economic arrangements of the country, and second, disillusionment with utopian socialism. According to Arrowsmith, any writer who falls outside this pattern is hardly given any consideration by *Partisan Review*. He observed that if a writer is not the “intensely alienated, neurotic, ‘Jewish,’ dissident artist,” then *Partisan Review* was likely to dismiss the writer as “nothing but the insane titan, the tragic buffoon, of popular and lowbrow culture.”<sup>55</sup> Arrowsmith accused the editors of *Partisan Review* of limiting their interest to a narrow segment of modern literature, and he concluded that their “sense of overt alienation” had overwhelmed their literary tastes.<sup>56</sup> For Arrowsmith this was nothing but an urban provincialism that seemed to exclude the writers, such as Eliot and Tate, that he thought worthy. He did take care to exempt Trilling from this criticism, arguing – somewhat unpersuasively – that *Partisan Review* had also ignored Trilling’s great achievements as a writer. However, while it is clear that Arrowsmith was in sympathy with Trilling’s polemic against romanticizing the image of the neurotic artist, it is also obvious that he had more pedestrian grievances against *Partisan Review*. The journal was, in his view, too political and radical, too modern, too urban.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 530.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 528-529.

In addition to the condemnation made by Arrowsmith and others against left-wing critics, Howe was also troubled by recent attacks on the concept of the avant-garde. He understood the avant-garde to be intrinsically anti-capitalist and anti-bourgeois, and suspected the motives of those who criticized it too strenuously. One example that Howe pointed to was an article by Harold Rosenberg that appeared in *Commentary*.<sup>57</sup> In it, Rosenberg argued that the dichotomy between mass culture and the avant-garde was false. “The essential assumption of mass-culture,” according to Rosenberg, “is that the only experience recognized as common is real” -- that is, literature must be relevant to the common man. While there is confusion over this point in the West, he noted in an inflammatory insinuation, that in the Soviet Union it is brutally clear: “Non-mass art is outlawed and any expression of non-mass experience [is considered] dangerous.”<sup>58</sup> Rosenberg observed that despite this straightforward definition of mass-culture, the supposedly “anti-mass culture” organs, like *Partisan Review*, judge whether a work is a mass-culture product simply by the size of its audience. Furthermore, the proponents of “anti-mass culture” habitually demand that the artist “communicate the common experience of his level and that if he fails to do this it is because he is an egotist and ‘irresponsible’.”<sup>59</sup> Thus, the distinction between vulgar mass-culture and the intelligent avant-garde is false – both demanded that art accurately reflects “experience.” Rosenberg declared that in reality the members of the so-called avant-garde are proponents of the most vulgar form of mass culture, one that he explicitly linked with progressive politics, and implied was connected with Soviet totalitarianism.

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<sup>57</sup> Harold Rosenberg, "The Herd of Independent Minds," *Commentary* 6 (September, 1948), 244-252.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

In his "Magazine Chronicle," Howe demonstrated through the writings of these and other critics just how corrosive Trilling's view of alienation was to the thought of the radical left. Trilling's understanding of alienation could be used to deny any social purpose to literature. It was a view of alienation that provided critics -- perhaps not as pro-modernist as, and certainly more explicitly conservative than, Trilling would have approved of -- with a rationale to dismiss any literature that challenged established social and economic norms. To combat this trend, Howe made the case that extra-aesthetic criticism and historical contextualization had a legitimate place in literary criticism. For Howe, the fact that artists believed in the "myth" of alienation was in itself significant. Alienation and the avant-garde were historical facts that emerged from specific social-economic situations. And while extra-aesthetic factors ought not override the purely aesthetic, they must not be ignored. The alternative was unacceptable for Howe. Pointing to these and other recent articles, Howe feared that the country was entering an age of critical, as well as political, timidity. "The bulk of current criticism," he maintained, "is a variety of moralistic impressionism." It seemed to Howe that critics "avoid social or psychological concepts like the plague, but give them a roomy and portentous moral abstraction and they will abandon their texts with a light heart."<sup>60</sup> He asked, "Where, all the while, is the opposition, the rebellious and exuberant avant-garde?" Howe's exasperated answer was: "Nowhere in sight, for it no longer exists. New magazines pop up regularly, but few show any distinct view or standard warranting a separate existence."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Howe, "Magazine Chronicle," 418.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 423.

It could not have come as a complete shock to Trilling and Chase that Howe would oppose their particular brand of anti-radicalism. He had by 1949 established a reputation for an idiosyncratic progressivism that, although firmly anti-Stalinist, was nonetheless more sympathetic to left-wing radicalism than the prevailing culture of the *Partisan Review* circle. What was unexpected to Chase and Trilling was the vociferous opposition to their critique of liberalism that came from *Partisan Review* associate editor William Barrett. Barrett was the author of the infamous 1946 *Partisan Review* editorial, “The Liberal Fifth Column,” which excoriated liberals – especially those that wrote for the *Nation* and the *New Republic* -- for acting as apologists for Stalin’s expansionist policies.<sup>62</sup> The editorial signaled the beginning of the Cold War for American intellectuals. It was filled with inflammatory rhetoric that labeled any liberal who was sympathetic to the Soviet Union a traitor. Looking back some thirty years later, Barrett admitted being “embarrassed by the crudity of the piece,” but maintained that the basic facts contained in the editorial were not only correct but still true, as though “nothing had changed” since the 1940s.<sup>63</sup>

Given Barrett’s anticommunism and his own attack against “liberals,” it is somewhat surprising that Barrett would challenge Richard Chase and Lionel Trilling. But while all three men had what can be described as having an anti-radical agenda, there were subtle but important differences in the way they understood culture and its relationship to politics. Barrett commented on the controversy surrounding Chase and the professors from Smith College in the March 1949 issue of *Partisan Review*. He began his comments with an allusion to the *Review*’s “Failure of Nerve” series from some

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<sup>62</sup> Barrett, “The ‘Liberal’ Fifth Column,” 279-293.

<sup>63</sup> William Barrett, *The Truants: Adventures Among Intellectuals*, (Garden City, New York, 1982), 82.

six years ago. “The twentieth century is the failure of the nineteenth,” wrote Barrett. “Hence follow many things through which we are now living, including a rather strange religious revival or the effort at one, as well as a great variety of attacks from various quarters upon what used to be called the liberal ideology.”<sup>64</sup> He continued by thanking, “Messrs. Arvin, Davis, and Aaron,” for noting the “broader issues” raised by Chase’s literary criticism. This criticism, Barrett argued, was not about literature at all. It seemed to him that Chase was making “an amazing confusion between literature and life, the past and the present and the relevant and irrelevant.” The question then of whether Iago was a progressive was indeed absurd; for that matter, so was Chase’s description of Melville’s Claggart as a liberal. The problem, argued Barrett, was that Chase was “in the grip of an *idée fixe*” that obliterated “the boundaries of literary criticism.” The idea that Chase was fixated on was that liberalism – in the broadest sense of the word– was a failure.<sup>65</sup>

After dismissing Chase as a critic whose own confusion of reality and literature risked “parodying himself out of existence,” Barrett turned to Lionel Trilling as the source of Chase’s negative appraisal of liberalism. And it is here that Barrett got to the very heart of the issue. Trilling insisted on using the word liberalism, rather than the more philosophically specific “naturalism” or “pragmatism” or the historically and ideologically more specific “Stalinism” because, as Barrett detected, “he is dealing with the fundamental human attitudes behind the political will.”<sup>66</sup> In principle, Barrett had no problem with Trilling’s critique of liberalism. Like Trilling, Barrett accepted it as a given that liberalism had been a historical failure, unable adequately to address the economic and political crisis of the twentieth century. But, Barrett asked, how far should this

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<sup>64</sup> William Barrett, “What is the ‘Liberal’ Mind?” *Partisan Review* 16 (April, 1949), 331-335.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 333.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

criticism go? It seemed to him that Trilling's attack against the "liberal imagination" ought to differentiate among individuals. Was there not, Barrett asked, a difference between the liberalism of "Mr. Max Lerner and Mr. Sidney Hook," or "between Harold Laski and Bertrand Russell?" Also, while it may be true that contemporary "liberal" critics have failed to appreciate great literature and what it tells us about the human condition, could this not be due to their individual failings, their own "literalism," rather than do to their politics? Barrett also detected a disturbing self-righteousness in Trilling. "If 'the moral imagination' refers to the novelist's ability to record sensitively the moral conflicts of his characters," he asked, "how does it differ from what used to be called 'psychological insight'?"<sup>67</sup> By what right did Trilling have in describing this as a "moral" problem? And what were the values that provided a foundation for Trilling's morality? Barrett feared that, like T.S. Eliot, Trilling was using his literary criticism to promote a moral absolutism that was the antithesis of not simply liberalism as it existed in the mid-twentieth century but liberalism as it emerged from the Enlightenment. Barrett concluded with a challenge to Trilling: "It is conceivable that we have finished forever with the Liberalism and the Enlightenment, that their intellectual values are no longer of use to us; but if so, we should like to know it; and if we shall know it only if critics direct their scrutiny to the central attitudes, beliefs, and values involved, rather than to the various peripheral aberrations of these."<sup>68</sup>

Barrett's attack on Chase and Trilling was motivated by two issues. The first was that Barrett was genuinely offended with the way that Chase used language. One gets the sense that Chase had up to this point gotten away with the rhetorical equivalent of

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 335.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 336.

murder. His literary criticism was filled with ferocious slashing attacks against the politics of other critics. Unlike his mentor, there was no subtle camouflage of these attacks as simple literary criticism. It was blatant and obvious, and Barrett thought that Chase had gone too far. But Chase was not the main subject of Barrett's response; Lionel Trilling was, and it was Barrett's interest in the political implications of Trilling's criticism that fundamentally motivated his comments. For all the subtlety of Trilling's prose, Barrett detected the political agenda that motivated Trilling and wanted to bring this agenda into the open. Part of this was simply his job as an associate editor. Barrett wanted to bring issues to the forefront in order to encourage discussion. More specifically, he wanted from Trilling an explicitly political essay to publish in *Partisan Review*. However, Barrett's interests as an associate editor in Trilling should not be overstated. While an explicitly political essay from Trilling would have made an interesting article for *Partisan Review*, it was not as if Trilling's political views were a mystery. There would be no surprises in a purely political essay by Trilling. His numerous essays and his novel, *The Middle of the Journey*, while far more nuanced and subtle (and diplomatic) than Chase's work, left no doubt about Trilling's antagonism toward radical culture. And it was this antagonism – this anti-radicalism – which so disturbed Barrett.

Like Howe, Barrett wanted to defend the concept of an avant-garde against the anti-radicalism of Trilling and Chase. He saw the avant-garde as a bulwark against the baseness of mass culture. And in stark contrast to Trilling, he believed in the reality and the historical significance of alienation. It was not a “myth” or a bohemian affectation, but rather a reasonable -- and in a sense, rational -- response to the leviathan of mass culture. As Barrett observed, his own city – New York – had become “the great

Philistine capital.” It was the center of a broadcast industry that relentlessly homogenized the culture and destroyed the imagination of Americans. So great was “the alienation” of artistic Greenwich Village from the “vast Temple of the Soap Opera, Radio City” in midtown Manhattan that there was “not even a possible medium of communication.” In the face of this not just real but overwhelming cultural division, Barrett understood that the avant-garde provided a much-needed “resistance.” While he admitted that there were certainly “crack pot, bohemian, half-baked and self indulgent” ideas and attitudes found in this resistance, Barrett nevertheless maintained that he also had to “accord to them the title of ‘hero.’”<sup>69</sup>

Like Howe, Barrett was also devoted to the idea of modern literature. However, his reasons were less overtly political than those of Howe. Although Barrett could be described in 1949 as typically left of center, he was hardly the activist that Howe was. He was never as politically engaged as Howe and did not share Howe’s passion for progressivism as a matter of social policy. Instead, Barrett was more philosophically committed to the ideal of an avant-garde and the message of modern-literature -- or to be more precise, the critique of modernity that was contained in modern literature. He was trained as a philosopher; he had a Ph.D. in philosophy from Columbia University and taught philosophy at New York University from 1950 until 1972. Barrett understood the multiple crises of modernity -- including the crisis of war and economic depression as well as the philosophical crisis -- as a product of the collapse of any fixed values, including the belief in God or any sense of the absolute, since the Enlightenment. In contrast to most of the *Partisan Review* circle, Barrett did not turn to Marxism, or even a refined modified version of Marxism, to provide meaning and value in a disenchanted

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<sup>69</sup> William Barrett, "The Resistance," *Partisan Review* 13 (October, 1946), 479-488.

post-Enlightenment world. Instead, he turned to existentialism. Barrett had been attracted to the work of Kierkegaard and Heidegger as a student, but it was as an associate editor of *Partisan Review* that he began to focus intensely on existentialist philosophy. Ironically, his involvement with existentialism began when the Marxist-inclined editor of *Partisan Review*, Philip Rahv, asked Barrett to translate an article on existential philosophy by Hannah Arendt. Although the article ignored French existentialism and concentrated on Heidegger (in fact, Arendt insisted that the German word “Existenz” be used in the English translation), Barrett soon found himself promoting and popularizing the works of Jean-Paul Sartre, who in the mid-forties was a frequent contributor to *Partisan Review*, and other French existentialists. In many ways, Barrett can be described as an existential modernist.<sup>70</sup>

Barrett was never an uncritical devotee to the post-war cult of French existentialism. He did not hesitate to censure Sartre when the French philosopher turned to Marxism and affiliated with the Communist Party in the late forties.<sup>71</sup> Yet Barrett perceived in Sartre’s work, especially in his concept of a *littérature engagée*, the idea, indeed philosophical necessity, of resistance, even revolt, against the cold meaninglessness and freedom-crushing tendency of modern mass society. For Barrett, Sartre’s philosophy had proven its worth during the dark days of the German occupation of France. “The Résistance,” he declared, “required an heroic and secular philosophy, in which heroism is born out of absolute despair, out of the experience of nothingness, and Sartre, ready with his version of Heidegger, became the man for that hour.” Sartre,

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<sup>70</sup> Barrett, *The Truants: Adventures Among Intellectuals*, 99-105.

<sup>71</sup> William Barrett, “The End of Modern Literature,” *Partisan Review* 16 (September, 1949), 942-949; William Barrett, “Talent and Career of Jean-Paul Sartre,” *Partisan Review* 13 (Spring, 1946), 327-246.

through his literature, provided a justification for the “absurd” resistance in a world without transcendent values.<sup>72</sup>

Despite his celebration – a celebration that bordered on myth-making – of Sartre’s role in the French resistance, Barrett was not as interested in the political ramifications of existential revolt as he was in its literary implications. In fact, Barrett cautioned that existentialist philosophy did not automatically lead to superior political judgment. On the contrary, Heidegger’s support for the Nazis, and Sartre’s flirtations with Marxism illustrated that existentialists were quite prone to error. Instead Barrett emphasized the way existentialist philosophy made a modern literature – that is, a literature that was aware of the “uneasiness and tensions within bourgeois society” -- possible. He argued that in a philosophical sense, not in an aesthetic sense, modernist writers have created work that was “more profound than the art of the past,” by addressing the very “modern” question of individual freedom.<sup>73</sup> For Barrett, Dostoevsky’s character, the Underground Man, was emblematic of the existentialist hero. This hero, he observed, was also found in Céline’s *Journey to the End of Night*, in Sartre’s *La Nausée*, in Camus’s *The Stranger*, and even in Faulkner’s novels, and in any character in modern literature who rejects a society bereft of meaning and purpose, and proclaims his or her existential freedom. This is, again, not to say that Barrett was in any sense a political radical. He understood that the “Underground Man” could be dangerous, that he was “not always philosophical and harmless,” and that “in the twentieth century [the Underground Man] has also become a Nazi functionary” and “an NKVD official herding thousands of Europeans to their

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<sup>72</sup> Barrett, "Talent and Career of Jean-Paul Sartre," 237.

<sup>73</sup> William Barrett, *What is Existentialism?* (New York, 1947), 55-56.

death.”<sup>74</sup> But as a literary construction, the Underground Man was essential if the anxiety – the *angst* – created by modern society was to be adequately addressed.

Chase and Trilling’s apparently cavalier dismissal of the estrangement of the artist from society seemed to Barrett to be a flight from reality, an evasion of history, and philosophically irresponsible. He recognized that Trilling had a Freudian rather than an existentialist understanding of anxiety. Furthermore, Barrett understood that Freud’s understanding of anxiety as a neurosis to be cured – or at least repressed – might be superior to Heidegger’s understanding of anxiety as an omnipresent motivation of human action.<sup>75</sup> But Barrett insisted that Heidegger had to be given his due. The anxiety created by modern society could not be suppressed or sublimated all the time. Therefore the discussion about anxiety, or modern *angst*, had to continue, and modern literature provided an ideal venue for this discussion. It appeared to Barrett that by promoting literature in which revolt – in both the philosophical and political sense – was impossible, Chase and Trilling were trying to put into effect a system in which a discussion regarding the fundamental cause and nature of anxiety was no longer feasible.

Barrett’s opposition to Chase and Trilling is significant because politically his position was very close to theirs. Indeed, if anything, Barrett was a more pronounced and vigorous anticommunist than Chase and Trilling. Actually, Barrett was politically to the right of both men. Yet he recoiled from the anti-radical underpinnings of the literary criticism of Chase and Trilling. This was not because he feared – as Howe did – that left-wing political radicalism would be compromised, rather Barrett feared that philosophical radicalism, as well as literary creativity, would be undermined. Chase’s inflammatory

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 61-62.

<sup>75</sup> William Barrett, "Dialogue on Anxiety," *Partisan Review* 14 (March-April, 1947), 151-158.

rhetoric, and the more subtle criticism of Trilling that motivated this rhetoric, struck Barrett as nothing less than an attempt to limit the intellectual possibilities of critical discourse. Unfortunately, Barrett did not make his substantial philosophical objections explicit, and instead his critique of both Chase and Trilling focused on the superficial rhetorical flaws of their argument. This obscured Barrett's case and reduced the level of discourse.

Also contributing to the diminished level of discourse was the fact that Chase did not respond well to Barrett's criticism. Still very much an insecure junior scholar, Chase felt that he had been blindsided by Barrett. He complained to Trilling that *Partisan Review* had handled the whole affair badly. "I'm given one page to answer the four page attack by the Smith brothers," he protested, "and then pounced on by one of the editors in an extensive attack which shows no extensive desire to find out what I in general mean in my published pieces but simply harps on a couple of phrases of mine." Mixed in with Chase's annoyance was a real fear that he would be banned from the pages of *Partisan Review*. He explained to Trilling that he simply wanted to be given space for a reply, and acknowledged that he sent a "conciliatory note" to the executive editor, William Phillips, saying that he did not "want to be tossed out of PR."<sup>76</sup>

Chase's fears may have been exaggerated. Phillips eventually reassured Chase that although his comments on "ordealism, alienation, and liberals have stirred up a controversy," Phillips would rather that they appear in *Partisan Review*, for he had always conceived of the magazine as "the place where these disagreements could be

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<sup>76</sup> Richard Chase to Lionel Trilling, March 11 [1949], Box 2, Lionel Trilling Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

thrashed out.”<sup>77</sup> Amiable correspondence aside, the controversy surrounding Chase’s remarks exposed an unhealed wound. For a moment, the sectarian struggles of the thirties reappeared, complete with the most inflammatory language and accusations. What is remarkable is the way that Chase, who had not been a partisan to the struggles of the last decade, so easily incorporated the rhetoric of that time. As he explained to Trilling, the professors from Smith College were “Pharisees,” or Stalinists who were “dishonest and immoral,” thus their attack was to be expected. Howe and Bennett were a different matter. Chase recognized that they were “anti-Stalinists,” but it appeared to him that they were “committing the same sins as the Stalinists.” “They have a genuine fear and suspicion of art,” Chase complained to Trilling, “and a desire to explain as far as possible in order not to feel it necessary to ask what is the moral and intellectual relevance of art to the perennial human problems.” Chase believed that in contrast to their accusations against him, it was they who were reifying art into an irrelevant sphere. They were “philistines” whose “exaggerated affection for the Enlightenment” led them to view literature as ultimately a “frivolous and obscure thing” that must be kept “separate from the real realism of life.” The artist, therefore, must be viewed in “isolation,” and art, in keeping with this “bourgeois, and Stalinist, idea of literature,” must be “appreciated” for its “beauty.”<sup>78</sup> In short, Chase was accusing Barrett and Howe of not only sustaining Stalinism, but of the worse sin that could be perpetrated by a New York intellectual – of being middlebrow. Ironically, Trilling and Chase’s opponents were accusing them of precisely the same sin. Matthiessen told Chase that Trilling was the leader of the latest revival of the Genteel Tradition. And Howe and Barrett feared that

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<sup>77</sup> Phillips to Richard Chase, 9 March 1949, Box 2, Richard Chase Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

<sup>78</sup> Richard Chase to Lionel Trilling, March 11 [1949].

there was a new “moralism” underlying Trilling’s critical sensibilities. It seems that both sides thought they were preserving freethinking from a cultural system that demanded conformity and homogeneity. The conflict also suggests an internecine quarrel among modernist critics over the political and cultural implications of modernism.

Despite their apparent agreement on what they saw as the basic issues at stake, Trilling and Chase understood this conflict differently. Howe and Barrett correctly recognized – although they could have publicly articulated it better – that Trilling was truly an anti-radical. And Trilling would not disagree with them. Notwithstanding their conflict, all three men essentially agreed that the avant-garde and cultural radicalism was a product of a particular time and place and was a response to a particular set of social circumstances. The argument was over what was the present-day relevancy of this radicalism. Barrett and Howe, for different reasons, understood the radical posture to be necessary for any honest criticism – whether it was literary, social, or political criticism. Trilling understood the radical posture to be just that – a posture. It was from his perspective an adolescent affectation, and not the position of a mature critic or, for that matter, a mature citizen. When it came to the avant-garde, Trilling was more skeptical than either Howe or Barrett. All three men could be described as modernist critics, but Trilling was clearly by this time moving away from the idea that the avant-garde represented an artistic ideal. While he appreciated the sophistication and complexity – especially the way it depicted complex moral situations – of modern literature, Trilling did not see it as especially distinct from other examples of superior literature from the past. As for the avant-garde, Trilling increasingly understood the term as an affectation,

and was moving toward explicitly embracing the concept of the highbrow as a cultural ideal.

Naturally there were political implications to Trilling's understanding of modernism. There was a form of elitism implied in Trilling's criticism, an elitism that proponents of the avant-garde tried to deny by assigning the avant-garde a revolutionary or, at least, critical role in history that linked it to some form of political radicalism. But Trilling never really directly addressed the political ramifications of his version of modernism. While he came closest to attacking political radicalism directly during the late forties, his critique was too immersed in literary issues for the clear expression of the anti-radical nature of his modernism. And this was by design. Trilling wanted to limit the possibilities for radical expression and at the same stand for open liberal discourse. Given Trilling's experience during the left-wing sectarian conflicts of the 1930s, his position, although paradoxical, is understandable. He saw simplistic political and moral formulas – the kind that characterized progressive and Marxist criticism of the inter-war period– as the root of the totalitarian impulse. His emphasis on moral complexities and a literature that reflected “reality” was for him a way of preserving the individual freedom of intellectuals. Thus Trilling strenuously avoided reducing his position to a specific and coherent set of political beliefs. Indeed, in Trilling's mind, the most important implication of his criticism was that modernism – as an artistic and literary movement – had to be understood as independent of any political context.

Chase, on the other hand, viewed the conflict differently. This was natural. He had not personally experienced the sectarian struggles of the thirties. He never experienced a radical phase. And, unlike Trilling, he never felt profoundly alienated

from American society as a whole. For Chase, although his rhetoric was a product of the anti-Stalinist movement of the 1930s, this conflict was less about politics than it was about literary criticism. He was defending what he understood as an argument for a relevant criticism, one that would be equally at home in an academic environment and a highbrow, but more general, journal of opinion. It was a criticism that to be sure was infused with political significance, but it also was very much a part of belle-lettres. Chase also felt that he was defending his particular work and his particular style and approach to criticism. Thus for Trilling and Chase, this conflict meant different things. For Chase it was both less significant and more important than it was for Trilling. It was less significant for Chase because he was never really – and could not be – as dedicated to the political implications of their criticism. It was more important for Chase in that he was justifying his own work, his own approach, in a way that the well-established and respected Trilling did not have to.

The difference between the how Trilling and Chase viewed this conflict can be seen in their correspondence planning their responses. Trilling clearly understood the political stakes and used this discourse as a preview for his first book of essays, *The Liberal Imagination*, which would be published the next year. Chase followed his mentor's lead, but there was a tension between the political agenda of the two men and Chase's particular brand of literary criticism. Chase's perception of American literature as a mythic depiction of the American condition never quite coalesced with Trilling's anti-radicalism. This is not to say that Chase was not a sincere devotee to Trilling's political outlook. Nor is it to suggest that Chase did not fully understand the political implications of anti-radical modernism, or that Trilling somehow used his protégé to

promote his political polemic. However, unlike Trilling, Chase was still in the early stages of the development of his critical approach, and he had not integrated his political and aesthetic sensibilities into a seamless whole as Trilling had done. While Chase can be described as a Trilling anti-radical modernist, he never quite figured out how to integrate the anti-radicalism with the modernism. Nevertheless, in 1949, Chase was zealously committed to both anti-radicalism and modernism.

For Lionel Trilling, Howe and Barrett's participation changed the character of the discussion. He agreed with Chase that the "Smith Brothers Karamazov" were "New Pharisees" and dismissed them as secondary.<sup>79</sup> Barrett and Howe were a different matter, though. Trilling felt that Barrett had been very impolite with his commentary. He called executive editor of the *Partisan Review*, Philip Rahv, and demanded space to reply to Barrett's attack. The discussion was apparently heated enough that Rahv was compelled to ask apologetically if Trilling felt that Barrett had insulted him. Trilling's telling reply was that while he, personally, had not been offended, Barrett certainly had insulted Chase.<sup>80</sup> When Trilling related this conversation to Chase, he suggested that Chase might also want to "answer at length" the string of criticism that had been directed against him. It then occurred to Trilling that perhaps they should reply together. At this point Trilling was somewhat ambivalent, wondering "if we wouldn't be most effective silent," but he was, nonetheless, "prepared for battle." What had begun as a relatively minor letter to the editor had become a major argument, involving prominent New York intellectuals, over the intellectual and political consequences of anti-radical modernism.

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<sup>79</sup> Lionel Trilling to Richard Chase, 7 March [1949], Box 2, Richard Chase Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University; Lionel Trilling to Richard Chase, not dated [February/March, 1949].

<sup>80</sup> Lionel Trilling to Richard Chase, 7 March [1949].

By the middle of March, Trilling determined the strategy that he and Chase would pursue in answering their critics. He decided that Howe's criticism was not as severe as Barrett's and did not require a public response. Part of the reason for this was that Howe had at this time a close relationship with Trilling and, to a lesser extent, Chase. Unlike Barrett, Howe gave both men ample warning that he had written a piece critical of their work, and he went out of his way to emphasize that this criticism was not meant to be taken personally. It seems that Howe's effort to keep the exchange friendly was successful. Trilling wrote to Chase that Howe did not need to "be answered at all in any special way," and that, overall, "Howe's manner is very pleasant."<sup>81</sup> Other factors contributed to Trilling differentiating Howe's critique from Barrett's other than simply friendship. Trilling perceived that Howe's critique was one of degree while Barrett attacked the philosophical heart of Trilling's anti-radical program. As Trilling noted, he and Chase were "but items among many" in Howe's piece. Furthermore, Howe was making an argument for placing the artist in historical and social context. As a matter of principle, Trilling and Chase did not object to this, and indeed they were adamant that their criticism insisted that the artist be placed in just such a context and not be regarded in isolation. After all, Chase and Trilling made a point of distinguishing themselves from the New Critics who, in their view, really wanted to de-politicize and de-historicize literary criticism. Thus Trilling instructed Chase that Howe's "objections aren't, dramatically and intellectually, of the same sort as Barrett's and that it would be a mistake to confuse the issue by dealing with them in the same way."<sup>82</sup> Chase also

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<sup>81</sup> Lionel Trilling to Richard Chase, 16 March 1949, Box 2, Richard Chase Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

<sup>82</sup> Lionel Trilling to Richard Chase, 21 March [1949], Box 2, Richard Chase Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

thought that a specific response to Howe might not be necessary. He believed that his upcoming Melville book would answer Howe by showing that, despite his censure of the “ordealist” school of criticism, he nevertheless understood that the artist’s alienation and estrangement from capitalistic society was a historical fact and, in the case of Melville, was integral to understanding the work of the artist.<sup>83</sup>

Barrett was another matter though. Trilling felt that Barrett’s article was “disingenuous” and deliberately somewhat obtuse.<sup>84</sup> In particular, Trilling thought that Barrett’s very literal interpretation of Chase’s writing was a rhetorical ploy, thus allowing Barrett to write the rather nasty jibe that Chase risked “parodying himself out of existence.” Trilling recognized that his protégé’s casual and sweepingly combative style made him vulnerable to this kind of criticism. He instructed Chase that in any future reply, he ought to “be very direct and expository and literal” and avoid the “the irony” or “fancifulness” that characterized his previous work. Trilling, after discussing the matter with Barrett at a Saturday night gathering of the “Partisans,” reassured Chase that nothing was meant personally and that Barrett and the others had no ill will toward him and genuinely liked him. The hard-hitting criticism, as Trilling described it, was simply part of the “rough-and-tumble” of critical life, and Chase simply needed to learn how to “punch in the scrimmage.”<sup>85</sup> Putting aside Trilling’s assurances of the fundamentally friendly nature of the exchange, it is clear that he regarded Barrett’s critique as a semi-official censure from *Partisan Review*. He felt that he not only needed to defend the

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<sup>83</sup> Richard Chase to Lionel Trilling, March 17, 1949, Box 2, Lionel Trilling Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University; Richard Chase, *Herman Melville*, (New York, 1971).

<sup>84</sup> Lionel Trilling to Richard Chase, 7 March [1949].

<sup>85</sup> Lionel Trilling to Richard Chase, 16 March 1949.

reputation of his former student, but that he also needed publicly to defend and reiterate his own anti-radical understanding of literary criticism.

Aside from the fact that as an associate editor of *Partisan Review* Barrett's criticism held more weight in the minds of Trilling and Chase than that of Howe, Barrett also had a more profound philosophical difference with Trilling. Howe merely suggested that Trilling did not give enough credence to historical context in his criticism. This, as Trilling and Chase observed, was a question of degree that they believed could easily be resolved. At the heart of Barrett's criticism, however, was an irresolvable philosophical difference. Barrett understood that Trilling's approach toward literature and politics require a person to view any radical rejection of "reality" (or the social status quo) as a product of psychological immaturity and neurosis that needed to be overcome rather than as a reasonable response to the alienating effects of modern civilization. Barrett did not have any particular political program in mind. He was, in many ways, a more strident critic of the radical left than Trilling was. He did think, however, that some accommodation with the irrational had to be made. From Barrett's point of view, the rationalism and resignation that Trilling demanded was not a viable way of dealing with the modern world. At some point, Barrett believed, one had to make an existential leap of faith. Without this leap, he feared, creativity and continued cultural development would be nearly impossible.

By the end of March, Trilling had arranged with Philip Rahv that the responses of Chase and himself to Barrett would appear together, along with a reply by Barrett, as a single "Variety" piece in *Partisan Review*.<sup>86</sup> Chase carefully crafted his essay. He promised Trilling that he was doing his best to be polite and to limit his tendency for

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<sup>86</sup> Lionel Trilling to Richard Chase, 21 March [1949].

awkward metaphors. And when he completed the essay, Chase sent a draft to Trilling to check for “any errors in tact” or to see if the essay contained “too many beasts and two-handed engines” that obscured its lucidity.<sup>87</sup> Trilling perused Chase’s draft and pronounced it “extremely elegant and just the right tone” and was confident that it would “get rid of any objections.”<sup>88</sup>

The essay was, in fact, quite good, certainly better than much of Chase’s previous polemical work. It was more serious and less inflammatory than his earlier critical pieces. It is also far more defensive. Chase began with a definition of liberalism:

If we take the word “liberalism” literally, it suggests two things: a belief in freedom and a copiousness and openness of mind and sentiment. For us, human beings involved in history, these two basic ideas cannot for long be considered apart from the instrumentality of Enlightenment doctrine. The practical instruments of modern liberalism are democratic, libertarian politics and the doctrine that the human reason, in its secular function, is capable of establishing the social conditions of freedom. I take this to be fundamental truth for our time, and think that no declared liberal can be taken seriously who does not base his liberalism upon this truth.<sup>89</sup>

This was a kind of creed for Chase. He was staunchly maintaining that he was not a crypto-conservative, bent of forcing the culture to return to a lost tradition. Nor did he argue that a more explicitly religious culture was needed to combat the corrosive effects of modern industrial society. Furthermore, Chase made it clear that he was not arguing that there is an absolute truth, only the absolute good of free enquiry. In short, he established his liberal *bone fides*.

After defending himself from the charge of being a conservative and clearly defining his understanding of liberalism, Chase addressed his critics. He recognized that

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<sup>87</sup> Richard Chase to Lionel Trilling, March 23, [1949], Box 2, Lionel Trilling Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

<sup>88</sup> Lionel Trilling to Richard Chase, 28 March 1949, Box 2, Richard Chase Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

<sup>89</sup> Chase, Trilling, and Barrett, "The Liberal Mind: Two Communications and a Reply," 649-665.

the definition of liberalism he gave in his opening statement would be acceptable to them, but he realized that the controversy that surrounded him was not merely a misunderstanding, but was, as he put it, quite “real.” To begin with there was, Chase observed, a disagreement on the “scope” of the word “liberalism.” He noticed that for his critics it is a term that should be restricted to “a particular kind of rationalism and a particular kind of politics.” In contrast, Chase argued that his purpose is to “make liberalism a somewhat broader and more octopus-like ideal and to emphasize its qualities of copiousness and openness of mind and sentiment.” Furthermore, “I do not regard this desire for latitude and exploration as a stratagem, conscious or unconscious, for establishing relationships with reaction or religious obscurantism.”<sup>90</sup> This is not to say that Chase did not understand that the religious sensibility could illuminate the darker facets of human existence. But he was not about to endorse any specific religious tradition; Chase was still very much a liberal who was convinced that modernity made traditional belief untenable. However, he maintained that literature provided a way for modern men and women to grasp the essential truths of religion, without succumbing to the straightjacket of dogma. If liberals did not recognize the essential role that literature plays in human understanding, then they risked turning their own Enlightenment principle into the very type of uncompromising dogma that they claim to oppose. He explained:

In the dim hinterlands of the mind of that particular liberal I have sometimes been concerned to attack, there dwell a number of monsters in the reality of which this liberal does not believe, though they exist in his own mind and excite his own emotions. Two of these monsters are religion and literature. The liberal who regards religion as no more than the befuddled dream of theologians and anchorites and literature as no more than the harmless play of the pleasure-principle is dealing himself a prodigious injury. For if it be said that religion and

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 649-650.

literature may be very fine and beautiful but that they have no relation to politics or reason, a deeply schismed and Janus-like vision of things is being advocated. Mr. Barrett's Janus-like vision invokes, though it does not guarantee, and indispensable philosophic clarity and political intransigence. And in so far, one cherishes his vision. But no one should mistake Mr. Barrett's bifocal ideology for a complete view of life and letters. It is well to try to reason clearly, but it is not well to cleave oneself asunder in the attempt. The fate of liberalism, so far as any one of us can control it, will depend on the flexibility and the resourcefulness and self-criticism of the mind which is based on, but not imprisoned within, the special doctrines of liberalism, Enlightenment doctrines. The historians know that when human culture reduces itself to the image of its instrumentality, it prepares itself for suicide. One of the functions of literature is to preserve culture from its own reductions – reductions of cogency, power, majesty, and humor – and one of the functions of literary criticism is to help literature do this.<sup>91</sup>

Chase was accusing his critics of being cultural philistines. They are, he insisted, marginalizing belle-lettres and reducing the intellectual history of the past two centuries to a simple test of Enlightenment principles. Overall, Chase accused Barrett and the others of a lack of imagination – not just moral or historical imagination, but a failure to open one's mind in the simplest ways toward literature. Thus, if Chase compared Iago to a liberal, he knew that the play was written before there was any such thing as liberalism. Yet the ideas in the play, the timeless qualities that make us value it to this day, are still relevant, and liberalism should be “tested” against this “classic study of certain kinds of behavior which on the whole liberalism has been unable to face or understand.”<sup>92</sup>

Chase very cleverly turned Barrett's earlier caricature of his criticism against itself. “Mr. Barrett,” Chase mockingly noted, “supposes that the character of Iago has no reference to anything outside the pages of Shakespeare's play, an idea from which Cleanth Brooks, for all his concern with ‘the text’ might well draw back.” Yet Barrett also called for a relevant literary criticism that is “productive” and “programmatically,” as opposed to “autotelic or Alexandrian.” How, asked Chase, can Barrett reconcile these

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 650.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

two positions? How is Barrett's call for a relevant criticism possible "once you have severed as many cultural arties as he severs?"<sup>93</sup> Chase maintained that his description of Melville's character, Claggart, as a liberal was justified. "In speaking of Claggart as I did at the end of my essay," wrote Chase, "I was trying to seek out those areas wherein life and literature mingle and vitalize each other." Barrett, Chase pointed out, seemed to deny "that there are any such areas preferring to imagine instead an unpassable abyss." What kind of criticism is possible, asked Chase, given "Mr. Barrett's preliminary implication that literature contains no 'facts about ourselves and our world?'" Literature must not be thought of as simply exercise in wish fulfillment or mere desire. It is, according to Chase, "a structured means of expression which the critics should examine, not failing to explore the moral and cultural relevance of what is expressed and to place the work in historical context." While Chase admitted that Barrett may have a point that there "is a danger in using literature as the language of one's own unwarranted moralizing," Chase insisted that it is "possible to avoid this error without denying the moral and cultural quality of literature."<sup>94</sup>

Chase concluded that although the principles of the Enlightenment are worth defending, we must not forget that the Enlightenment had its own limitations that prevented its philosophers and proponents from seeing the whole of reality. "Somewhere behind Mr. Barrett's words," Chase wrote, "I hear the voice of Voltaire, thin and rancorous on this occasion, fulminating against the myths and fables and declaring that only blockheads take them seriously. And does one not sense that another dispensable Enlightenment idea is being unwittingly invoked, an idea of perfectibility, a hope that if

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 651.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

liberalism is kept pure by being freed of the artificialities and corruption of culture, it will prosper out of its inner value?”<sup>95</sup>

Chase and Trilling coordinated their responses well. The Trilling essay, which followed Chase’s, continued the discussion of the Enlightenment begun by Chase. Trilling presented an interpretation of intellectual history that was at odds with the traditional liberal narrative. Instead of describing the Romantic era as part of a counter-Enlightenment, that is, an emotional reaction against reason, Trilling described the two eras as in a “dialectical” relationship with one another. He explained that:

The Enlightenment is but one element of a dialectical situation of which the opposing and complementary element is Romanticism. John Stuart Mill’s essays on Coleridge and Bentham are a classic statement of the nature of this dialectic, and Freud’s work may be understood as a present example of a possible synthesis of the two elements. I can perhaps suggest to Mr. Barrett at least the approximate limits of my criticism of liberalism if I say that it has been guided by my sense that contemporary liberalism seems incapable of responding to the realistic values of Romanticism which, equally with the idealistic values of the Enlightenment, are properly part of its heritage.<sup>96</sup>

There is something counterintuitive about Trilling’s description of the “realistic” values of Romanticism and the “idealistic” values of the Enlightenment. Yet this understanding of the relationship of Romanticism to the Enlightenment followed from Trilling’s assertion that the irrational aspects of human existence, or to be more precise, the inner psychological underpinnings and turmoil of human existence, are not adequately addressed by traditional liberal rationalism. It was Trilling’s belief “that the liberal imagination has literalness as one of its characteristics,” and that literature could perhaps counteract this narrow view of human nature.

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 652.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 654.

Trilling insisted that “literature is one of the cultural agents that form attitudes,” and that it had an important role in informing the public (or, at least the reading public) about the human condition in a way that the Enlightenment conception of the *tabulae rasae* – which implied that the origin of corruption of reason can be found and eliminated in social structures – was incapable of doing. Trilling explicitly revealed his position, “I think that literature in its relation to life is polemical.” He was sure, however, to differentiate clearly his understanding of a polemical literature from that of the Stalinist. “If it be objected that this assimilation of art to life is exactly what Stalinist culture has done,” he explained, “I answer that it is not the assimilation that is in error but Stalinism’s small view of life, its insufficient notion of art, its inadequate idea of what the connection is between life and art. And to this I would add the profound *ill-will* of Stalinism toward both life and art.”<sup>97</sup> Given Trilling’s polemical understanding of literature, Chase’s hypothetical question about Iago did not seem so absurd. Trilling explained that Chase did not mean to suggest that Iago voted for Wallace. “I take him to mean,” he added, “that what [Chase] calls ‘the great images of man and his career on earth’ have a continuing though fluctuating relevance, sometimes quite specific, sometimes only paradigmatic, to our present moral and thus to our present political situations.”

Chase had absorbed the teachings of his mentor well. Although his earlier polemical pieces were, compared to Trilling’s work, a bit crude and too combative, this last essay was an excellent reflection of Trilling’s understanding of the relationship between literature and politics, and it was a perfect prologue to Trilling’s essay. Indeed, taken together, Trilling and Chase’s response pieces provide an ideal summation of

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 656.

Trilling's anti-radical modernism. Trilling wanted to synthesize what he understood as the best of the Romantic era and the Enlightenment. It was an exercise in Aristotelian moderation. The rationalism and optimism of the Enlightenment would be tempered by the Romantic understanding of the darker instinctual and irrational aspects of human nature (which were so aptly described by Freud) without succumbing to a wish-fulfilling blind faith in an absolute idealism based on either traditional religion or recent secular philosophy. For Trilling, this project was not simply confined to the rather narrow social circle of the New York intellectuals and a few other academic critics. It was a much-needed reformation to correct the basic assumptions that guided the institutions of American high-culture. In the last page of his response to Barrett, Trilling described the scope of his ambitious project.

[T]he ideas of our powerful teaching colleges, the assumptions of our social scientists, the theories of education that are now animating our colleges and universities, the notions of the new schools of psychoanalysis, the formulations of the professors of literature, particular of American literature. ... This is the liberal culture that my own criticism has ultimately, if with insufficient explicitness, been directed against, although not, I would say, with quite the purpose of "demolishing" it. I only do not want to see it go its way unquestioned, unchecked and unmodified because I believe that, unless purged and enlighten by a critical effort of great seriousness, it will inevitably corrupt and betray itself into the very opposite of its avowed intention of liberation.<sup>98</sup>

Chase and Trilling successfully caricatured Barrett's criticisms as those of a middlebrow philistine enamored with the clarity of Enlightenment rationalism. In fact, however, Barrett understood very well the irrational aspects of human existence. Unfortunately, he never brought his understanding of the necessity of existential revolt directly to bear in his critique of Chase and Trilling. Instead, Barrett played the role of a devil's advocate. In his reply to Chase and Trilling, he stubbornly maintained that

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 658.

Chase's anachronistic descriptions of literary characters were absurd. As for Trilling, Barrett rejected his "dialectical" understanding of the Enlightenment and insisted that Trilling was advocating the "counter-Enlightenment," favoring "instinct" over "reason." Overall, Barrett seemed to retreat in the face of Chase and Trilling's articulate defense. He began his reply with the disclaimer that he has acted merely as a "catalytic agent," whose purpose was to draw out the argument and to bring into the open certain questions about the ongoing critique of literature. Barrett specifically denied that this was the proper forum in which he ought to describe his own ideas on "religion, philosophy, literary criticism, and the history of ideas during the past few centuries."<sup>99</sup>

For some reason, Barrett backed down. Even before the two responses and reply were published, Barrett wrote to Chase assuring him that "the Claggart business" was "one small point," and that he simply wanted to "bring out some issues."<sup>100</sup> Later, he sent a note to Chase saying that it was "time to drop the polemic – especially so far as it centers around 'liberalism,' for the real problems lie elsewhere." Those problems were for Barrett the larger worldview implied by Trilling. Yet instead of directly addressing this worldview, Barrett shied away. He told Chase that because his own views on "religion, philosophy, etc." were unformed and he himself was "without fundamental beliefs," he felt that he could not rightly address these issues.<sup>101</sup> There is something undeniably disappointing about Barrett's failure. While it was certainly true that Barrett was, at the time, a relatively young intellectual, whose views were certainly still evolving, it is clear that he had already a strong grasp of the philosophical issues

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 658-665.

<sup>100</sup> Barrett, William to Richard Chase, 1 June 1949, Box 1, Richard Chase Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

<sup>101</sup> Barrett to Richard Chase, 11 June 1949, Box 1, Richard Chase Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

involved. Nevertheless, Chase and Trilling were able to box Barrett into an indefensible position as the proponent of a doctrinaire rationalism. Clearly, that was not Barrett's true position. When he objected to Trilling's description of the Romantic as part of the "dialectic" of the Enlightenment, he was not defending reason against irrationality, but he was actually defending "instinct," or irrationality, from being domesticated by Trilling. As a staunch Freudian, Trilling recognized the irrational and instinctive basis of human existence in a way that a pure rationalist of the Enlightenment could not. However, also as a Freudian, he believed that this irrationality could be, at least up to a point, subordinated by conscious reason. Barrett was not so sure. In what is his most honest statement of this exchange, Barrett confided to Chase that he suspected that his own worldview would eventually "veer toward the primitive, non-rational, [and] organic" because "one has to live somehow, and one can't live purely with knowledge and reason."<sup>102</sup>

More than thirty years later, Barrett described Trilling as a conservative, but a remarkably secular one. It seemed to Barrett that Trilling "had missed the plain figure in the carpet," the "overriding framework" within which modern literature has been written, that is, the "secularization of our culture and the gradual withdrawal of God that has been going on in the West since the seventeenth century."<sup>103</sup> Barrett speculated that Trilling was very much like Walter Lippmann. Both of these assimilated Jews could only perceive "religious attachment" as retrograde, "a step backwards in history."<sup>104</sup> However impolite Barrett's analysis may be – and, nonetheless, there surely is a great deal of insight in it – there is no doubt that Trilling had a difficult time understanding and

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Barrett, *The Truants: Adventures Among Intellectuals*, 182.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 185.

justifying faith, whether it was religiously or ideologically based. This is not merely a blind spot in Trilling's worldview. It is what defines him, and others, as anti-radical modernists. Trilling did not make claims based on the authority of an idealized absolute. In this way, he is a liberal relativist. At the same time, however, he was deeply suspicious of that American progressive trait first described by William James, the will to believe. Thus any radical scheme to remake society was for Trilling, as Freud described religion, simply an illusion.

Unfortunately, the shortcomings of Trilling's liberalism were not fully revealed in the Chase-Trilling-Barrett discourse. Barrett had missed an opportunity to expose, not just the political problems inherent in the anti-radical ideology of Trilling and Chase, but also its cultural limitations as well. It is undeniable that Trilling sought to limit what was considered quality literature. There was a strong potential for the stifling of creativity under Trilling's conceptualization of what constituted proper literature and criticism. None of this, however, was brought to the forefront during this discussion. Instead, it seemed that the whole thing ended rather anti-climatically, with Barrett looking the worse for it. "What a clown Barrett is," declared Mary McCarthy, who was, at the time a staunch liberal anti-communist. However, she also admitted to Chase that she could not "quite see in what sense Claggart is the self-righteous liberal." He certainly demonstrates enough resentment and cruelty to be a Stalinist but, she observed, none of the traits of a liberal. Indeed, McCarthy pointed out that the modern liberal, unlike Claggart, assumes a naïve egalitarian attitude and is shocked to find that this attitude is not universally held. She was compelled to remind Chase not to "confuse liberalism with Stalinism."<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> McCarthy to Richard Chase, 22 August 1949, Box 2, Richard Chase Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

As McCarthy's remarks highlight, Trilling had a better sense of the boundary between culture and politics than Chase. Barrett had a point when he accused Chase of confusing literature and politics. Trilling, in contrast, seemed to be able to combine effortlessly the two, while Chase's work was more often than not an awkward marriage of political and cultural concerns. Part of the reason for this is that Trilling had a better sense of the political issues at stake. Because of his experience during the thirties, Trilling had a strong sense of the potentially corrosive effects that politics could have on high culture. His experience also gave him a strong sense of political urgency; Trilling genuinely believed that he was fighting the forces of totalitarianism within the intellectual community. In contrast, Chase, despite the strong (perhaps too strong) political overtones of his writings, was primarily concerned with culture and not politics. Specifically, Chase wanted to maintain the status and importance of the critic within the literary community. Of course, Trilling certainly wanted to do the same but it was not a priority. Although he agreed with Chase that culture was important, Trilling felt that the critic's place was more secure than Chase believed. It is a question of emphasis and degree. The two men agreed on the critic's place in the literary community. Indeed, Chase's conception of an engaged criticism that intersected with the political and more strictly cultural realms, as well as academia and the more general literary community, reflected Trilling's teachings and example. Yet this question of emphasis – Chase's emphasis on the cultural rather than the political – explains the different discursive styles of Trilling and Chase.

The *Partisan Review* argument over liberalism and literary criticism had an unsatisfying ending for Chase. Although Barrett backed away from his harsh criticism of

Chase and the general impression was that Barrett came off poorly, Chase felt he did not have an opportunity to explain fully his own position. The triumph, such as it was, was more Trilling's than Chase's. In a sense, he had come to the rescue of his embattled former student. Moreover, the episode provided the perfect precursor to Trilling's *The Liberal Imagination*, which was published the next year. Chase, on the other hand, wanted to publish another article in *Partisan Review*, clarifying his understanding of alienation. The article was rejected, and was another demonstration of Chase's lack of political acumen. It described the critics who saw alienation as the primary trait of the modern artist as "aliationists" and "unmoralists." These "new aesthetics," as Chase labeled them, denied the relevancy of art to life, and were found in the ranks of both the progressive critics of the thirties and the ascending New Critics.<sup>106</sup> Again, Chase was fighting what he understood as cultural philistinism, not political extremism. Nevertheless, despite his intention, by the end of 1949 he had established himself as a combative anti-Stalinist, and an ardent proponent of Trilling's anti-radical modernism.

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<sup>106</sup> Richard Chase to Lionel Trilling, June 1, [1949], Box 2, Lionel Trilling Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### **The Counter-Progressive Ascendancy**

The Chase-Trilling-Barrett exchange was part of a larger discourse revolving around the dispute over the definition of liberalism. It was an argument that had been going on since before the end of the war and had accelerated after VJ day. The political situation, both inside and outside the United States, made the argument more urgent. Within the country it appeared that the New Deal coalition was in trouble. In 1946, the Republicans gained control of the House of Representatives, and it appeared for a time that they would surely win the White House. Abroad, the escalating Cold War divided the left, further weakening it, and thereby strengthening those forces that sought to reverse the political direction the country had been taking for the past two decades. Intellectuals organized to assure not only the continuation of the New Deal, but also to assure that their particular vision of liberalism triumphed. Perhaps the most dynamic of these organizations was Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), a coalition of leaders from labor and other traditional liberal constituencies, as well as intellectuals. The ADA worked to move liberal ideology toward the center and to build as wide as possible a political coalition to beat the Republicans at the polls. In a large measure it was quite successful.<sup>1</sup> In 1948, due in no small part to its efforts, Harry Truman narrowly won reelection. Perhaps, more importantly, the Democrats regained control of Congress.

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<sup>1</sup> For the founding and early efforts of the ADA, see Steven M. Gillon, *Politics and Vision: The ADA and American Liberalism 1947-1985*, (New York, 1987), 3-56; McAuliffe, *Crisis on the Left: Cold War Politics and American Liberals, 1947-1954*, 3-62; Frank A. Warren, *Noble Abstractions: American Liberal Intellectuals and World War II*, (Columbus, 1999), 108-129, 234-256; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Life in*

Despite this victory, the position of liberals in 1949 was far from secure. That year saw the discourse over the definition of liberalism reach a kind of climax. Within what can be roughly described as the liberal community – that is, those who sought to maintain the reforms of the New Deal – there was a renewed effort to purge any radicals who might support the Soviet Union, or in some way oppose American Cold War policy. At the same time, liberals of all types, including anticommunists and radicals alike, found themselves under increasing pressure. The culmination of the first phase of the Cold War in Europe – specifically the formalization of the division of Europe into two hostile blocks with the formation of NATO, the recognition of the Federal Republic of Germany by the West, and the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Germany in the Soviet occupation zone – increased tensions and appeared to end any hope of a peaceful post-war world order. In August, the fragile peace seemed threaten further when the Soviet Union tested an atomic weapon. In addition, the Cold War spread to Asia with triumph of the Communist forces in China. Both events had severe domestic repercussions and fueled the growing Red Scare in the United States. The Truman administration’s enemies exploited the Soviet atomic bomb and the “fall” of China by accusing the administration of deliberate negligence, if not outright treason. The impression that the government was riddled with Soviet agents was reinforced by the exposure of Alger Hiss in 1948 and the continuing controversy surrounding his perjury trials. The Republicans -- who had not won a presidential election in twenty years and were embittered by their narrow defeat in 1948 – and right-wing politicians increasingly relied on accusations of treason within the administration and other red-baiting tactics to gain political support. Thus, in 1949,

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*the Twentieth Century: Innocent Beginnings, 1917-1950*, (New York, 2000), 394-417; Alonzo L. Hamby, *Beyond the New Deal: Harry S. Truman and American Liberalism*, (New York, 1973), 161-168.

defining liberalism was not an academic exercise. An anticommunist, perhaps an anti-radical, definition of liberalism had profound implications.

Trilling and Chase were not active members of the ADA. Nor did either noticeably campaign for Truman – unless you count Chase’s mild politicking on behalf of the president while he spent the summer at Kenyon College. For the most part, Trilling and Chase’s political involvement was limited to intellectual activity. Both men tended to avoid direct political action in favor of employing their criticism and scholarship for political purposes.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, they were acutely aware that their work could have a direct political impact. Indeed, they hoped that it would. The Trilling-Chase-Barrett dialogue was very much part of the struggle to define liberalism, and Trilling and Chase (as well as Barrett) appreciated the political ramifications of their discussion. Chase understood his work on Melville as part of the contemporary discourse on liberalism. In the introduction to his second book, *Herman Melville* (1949), he explained that in addition to evaluating Melville’s work, the purpose of the book was to add to “a movement which may be described as the new liberalism – that newly invigorated secular thought at the dark center of the twentieth century which, whatever our cultural wreckage and disappointment, now begins to ransom liberalism from the ruinous sellouts, failures, and defeats of the thirties.”<sup>3</sup> And in his controversial essay about Melville’s *Confidence Man*, Chase concluded with a plea for the “new liberalism of the nineteen forties – of which in political theory Mr. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., is the most

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<sup>2</sup> Lionel Trilling did join several liberal anti-communist organizations during the forties, but his involvement was limited. In contrast, his wife, Diana, was very active and a member and officer in some prominent anti-communist organizations. See Diana Trilling, *The Beginning of the Journey*, 181-182. For an account of Diana Trilling’s enthusiasm at the time see, Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War*, 157-158.

<sup>3</sup> Chase, *Herman Melville*, v.

brilliant spokesman.”<sup>4</sup> The reference to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., was perhaps another example of Chase’s awkward blending of the cultural and the political, but it did explicitly connect his (and Trilling’s) anti-radicalism to the politics of the “new liberalism.” By citing Schlesinger in particular, Chase was making a very partisan political statement.

Schlesinger, like Trilling, was a prominent academic, but he was far more politically involved and socially connected than either Trilling or Chase. Born in 1917, Schlesinger followed his father’s example and became a Harvard University historian. In 1945, the younger Schlesinger won a Pulitzer Prize for his book, *The Age of Jackson*, and was widely referred to as the “boy wonder from Harvard” for his precocious scholarly achievements. But if scholarship ran in his family, so did political involvement. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., was a well known progressive historian who believed that his scholarly work had public policy implications. He was a very politically engaged professor, first at Ohio State University and later at Harvard. The elder Schlesinger was also married to Elizabeth Harriet Bancroft, an ardent feminist who published several articles on women’s history (she was also a distant descendant of the nineteenth-century American historian, George Bancroft).

Given this pedigree, it seems that it was inevitable that the junior Schlesinger would combine an academic career with political activism. As a student, he joined many liberal groups and was an early – at least by 1940 – proponent of American intervention in the Second World War. After Pearl Harbor, Schlesinger put his considerable writing skills to good use by working for the Office of War Information and later the Office of Strategic Services. Even before the war ended, Schlesinger envisioned and promoted a

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<sup>4</sup> Chase, "Melville's Confidence Man," 122-140.

left-wing anticommunist coalition. He wrote a report in the summer of 1945 that reassured the U.S. government that the Labour victory in Britain would not impede American plans for the post-war era and that a Labour government was actually more likely to effectively resist Soviet expansion than a Conservative government.<sup>5</sup> In December 1946, Schlesinger participated in the meeting that led to the founding of the ADA. He played a key role by encouraging the organization -- which grew from the independent socialist dominated Union for Democratic Action (UDA) -- to attach itself to the Democratic Party, rather than supporting an independent movement. It was his belief that if the New Deal was to be protected and expanded, it would have to have the support of a major party. Obviously, the Republican Party could not be counted on to support New Deal liberalism, so that left the Democratic Party, for all of its flaws and its substantial conservative elements, as the only avenue to advance liberal policies. Schlesinger feared that if the ADA instead concentrated on creating a third party with purer liberal credentials, it risked becoming irrelevant and would ultimately strengthen the forces of reaction within the United States.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, he was convinced that the United States had to resist Soviet expansion, and that the third party movement growing around Henry Wallace was -- in part, because it was communist-dominated -- committed to resisting and overturning the Truman administration's Cold War policies.

Schlesinger, although a young man and relatively inexperienced when compared to many of the veteran union leaders, intellectuals, and politicians who made up the ADA, was given the task in 1947 of writing a paper that explained the organization's position on foreign policy. He not only defended the Truman administration's policy of

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<sup>5</sup> Schlesinger, *A Life in the Twentieth Century: Innocent Beginnings, 1917-1950*, 324-325.

<sup>6</sup> Gillon, *Politics and Vision: The ADA and American Liberalism 1947-1985*, 17-18.

aiding the anticommunist regimes of Greece and Turkey, but he also attacked those who accused the president of betraying his predecessor's vision of a peaceful post-war order based on cooperation between the Soviet Union and the United States. The policy paper displayed his acute ability – which would become a hallmark of Schlesinger's work – of using historical arguments to support contemporary political positions. He argued that Roosevelt's declaration, in his 1938 Quarantine Speech, of the right of all nations to be free from external aggression was meant for all types of governments, including those that were not democratic. Thus, while Greece and Turkey were autocracies, they were still victims of “foreign” aggression and therefore deserved American support.<sup>7</sup> It was a neat argument and, at least on a rhetorical level, it reassured many liberals – but certainly not all -- that Truman was not departing from the foreign policy established by Roosevelt.

Schlesinger's rhetorical acumen suited his desire to be politically active, but it also made him something of a lightning rod for controversy. Many more radically inclined liberals saw his involvement in the ADA as evidence of the organization's lack of interest in domestic affairs, if not its outright abandonment of liberal issues. For example, liberal activist Tom Amlie and the former New Deal official and future Connecticut governor Chester Bowles were disheartened by Schlesinger's foreign policy speeches on behalf of the ADA. Amlie joined the organization in the hope it would create a genuine “third force” in American politics, one that supported an independent and social democratic Europe, as well as a reinvigorated New Deal at home. When Schlesinger spoke, Amlie realized that the ADA was going to support the administration's policies despite any lingering doubts about the president's commitment to liberal principles.<sup>8</sup> Bowles was an

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<sup>7</sup> McAuliffe, *Crisis on the Left: Cold War Politics and American Liberals, 1947-1954*, 31-32.

<sup>8</sup> Warren, *Noble Abstractions: American Liberal Intellectuals and World War II*, 142-143.

enthusiastic Democratic partisan and certainly believed that as a matter of loyalty and practicality the Democratic administration had to be supported. But he feared that the ADA was more concerned with fighting communists than Republicans, who he viewed as the primary threat to the liberal program.<sup>9</sup> In February 1947, Schlesinger further alienated prominent liberals when he represented the ADA in a meeting with the editorial board of the *New Republic*. At the time, Henry Wallace was editor of the magazine and was using his position to promote the agenda of Progressive Citizens of America (PCA), a group founded in late 1946 and titularly led by Wallace, that was dedicated to resisting the Cold War policies of the Truman administration. The meeting was unpleasant and heated, and it ended with Wallace and the other editors accusing Schlesinger and the ADA of promoting the “war party” in the United States.<sup>10</sup>

More than fifty years later, Schlesinger still thought the liberals who accused him and the ADA of red-baiting in the late forties were being “squeamish” and unreasonably obsessed with the fear of a third world war. He remembered Wallace coming late to the *New Republic* meeting appearing disheveled, “very grey,” “inarticulate and uncommunicative,” and utterly obsessed with the fear of war, “to the exclusion of all else.” But even more moderate liberals, such as journalist Theodore White, who was also present at the *New Republic* meeting and summarized to Schlesinger the magazine’s position that the United States was unnecessarily provoking the Soviet Union, felt that Schlesinger and the ADA were obsessed with the issue of communism.<sup>11</sup> The Cold War ripped the liberal community apart. The fierce but limited sectarian struggles of the 1930s between the Stalinist and anti-Stalinist left grew to become a major political

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<sup>9</sup> Gillon, *Politics and Vision: The ADA and American Liberalism 1947-1985*, 23.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>11</sup> Schlesinger, *A Life in the Twentieth Century: Innocent Beginnings, 1917-1950*, 412-414.

problem, which threatened the future of the New Deal coalition. While the ADA may have described itself as an organization dedicated to promoting liberal issues on a national level, its *raison d'être* was to defeat the radical left and marginalize its influence within the Democratic Party. When Wallace announced that he would oppose Truman as a third party candidate in 1948, the ADA concentrated on discrediting Wallace as a communist dupe. And Schlesinger played a key part in this campaign.

Unlike most of the New York intellectuals, Schlesinger was especially adept at writing concise and accessible articles for the popular press. Even before the formation of the ADA, Schlesinger accepted an assignment from Henry Luce in 1946 to write an article in *Life* magazine about the American Communist party (CPUSA). The article certainly was not a right-wing expose on the danger of the communist conspiracy. Schlesinger stressed that the Communist Party's influence was small and that it was making itself irrelevant in American politics by becoming an uncritical mouthpiece for Stalin.<sup>12</sup> Yet for all its superficial moderation, the article was a devastating piece of propaganda. It reinforced the idea that the Soviet Union was a genuine external threat to the United States. Furthermore, by denigrating the CPUSA as a pathetic puppet of the Soviet government, Schlesinger marginalized by creating an impression among liberals that it was an ineffective organization, while at the same time reassuring his more conservative readers by implying that the party was never an important part of the liberal coalition to begin with.

There is an unmistakable disingenuousness in Schlesinger's prose during this period. In contrast to Lionel Trilling, who depicted the radical left as a logical outgrowth of bourgeois liberalism, Schlesinger's rhetorical strategy was to depict the radical left as

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 394-399. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "The U.S. Communist Party," *Life*, July 29, 1946, 84-96.

deviating from fundamental liberal norms. Its radicalism justified its suppression. This sometimes required him to ignore or deny some obvious contradictions. In November 1947, for example, Schlesinger defended the Truman administration's loyalty program by citing the famous "clear and present danger" ruling by Justice Holmes. The historian argued that communist infiltration of the American government was a genuine threat and indicative of the anti-democratic tactics of the party. Yet Schlesinger also criticized the administration for its clumsy approach to the problem and recommended a set of procedures that would somehow safeguard civil liberties and maintain due process and, at the same time, protect national security. This was not an impossible task, but it was a difficult task and Schlesinger undoubtedly downplayed its difficulties. Instead of directly addressing the contradiction between the liberal desire for an open society and the needs of the growing security state, he insisted that basic liberal principles could guide an effort to remove "questionable characters" from government positions without it turning into an "indiscriminant purge."<sup>13</sup>

During the 1948 election campaign, the level of rhetorical excellence achieved by Schlesinger was unrivaled; he was, without doubt, the most talented liberal anticommunist polemicist at the time. His primary target was Henry Wallace. Despite his misgivings about Harry Truman's electability (Schlesinger was part of the misguided effort within the ADA to recruit Eisenhower as the Democratic nominee), Schlesinger, and the ADA as a whole, acted, in effect, as part of Truman's campaign apparatus by

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<sup>13</sup> Gillon, *Politics and Vision: The ADA and American Liberalism 1947-1985*, 80-81; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center*, (Boston, 1949), 187-218; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "What is Loyalty," *The New York Times Magazine*, November 2, 1947, 7, 48-52.

implementing the administration's strategy of appealing to liberal intellectuals.<sup>14</sup>

Schlesinger argued in the liberal journals of opinion for the creation of a strong "non-communist" liberal coalition. He insisted that this new liberal coalition, this "revival of the New Deal left," had to have a pragmatic outlook that rejected the "platitudes" of Wallace and included "responsible conservative elements," such as former Wall Street lawyer James Forrestal (the new Secretary of Defense) and the son of a railroad magnate, Averill Harriman. Although this revived New Deal coalition would be different than its 1930s predecessor – that is, it appeared to be somewhat more conservative than the original New Deal coalition – Schlesinger maintained it would still be pragmatic and liberal, and was – most importantly -- the only way to advance the cause of reform.<sup>15</sup>

Schlesinger was especially good at employing his knowledge of history for polemical purposes. He brilliantly used history not simply to prove his point, but to create a worldview in which his point was undeniable. Some of the best examples of this are the pieces that he wrote for a general audience. Just before the election, Schlesinger wrote two articles for the *Woman's Home Companion* explaining the similarities and differences between the two parties.<sup>16</sup> The articles made two important arguments. The first was an argument for the two party system and a defense of the non-ideological nature of the two major parties. Of course this implied that American third party movements were, at best, trivial, if not un-American. When it came to disenchanted Democrats, "one small group is hitting the sawdust trail of the Progressive party with

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<sup>14</sup> Clark Clifford and Richard Holbrooke, *Counsel to the President*, (New York, 1992), 191-194. Clifford describes the November 1947 memorandum that he wrote with James Rowe advising Truman to make a strong effort to appeal to "liberals" in order to neutralize Wallace. Also see, Hamby, *Beyond the New Deal: Harry S. Truman and American Liberalism*, 209--212.

<sup>15</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "Political Culture in the United States," *The Nation*, March 13 1948, 306-308.

<sup>16</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "The Democratic Party," *Woman's Home Companion*, October 1948, 34-35; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "The Republican Party," *Woman's Home Companion*, September 1948, 36-38.

Henry Wallace and the pro-Communists,” while “another follows Governor J. Strom Thurmond of South Carolina and the unreconstructed rebels.”<sup>17</sup>

The second argument made by the articles was that the Democratic Party was the party of liberal and competent government, while the Republican Party was the party of narrow business interests and short-sighted government. What is remarkable about these two articles is that these two basic arguments contradict one another. How can the two-party system be good if one party is controlled by a selfish elite? And how can the two parties be non-ideological and yet fundamentally different? Schlesinger skillfully navigated these rhetorical pitfalls. He did so by constructing a historical narrative that described the liberal, or progressive, elements as being the most dynamic and pragmatic in American history, as well as the most democratic. From the days of Jefferson, Schlesinger argued, the Democratic Party has been a pragmatic coalition of many factions and interests, guided by democratic principles and practical-minded leadership. The one point in American history when the Democratic Party was overwhelmed by a single interest group blinded by its ideology – southern slave owners – the Republican Party arose as a combination of old Whig East-Coast business interests and free-soil Democrats. United in their opposition to the slave-owning oligarchy, they provided the country with inspired leadership during the Civil War. However, after the war, Schlesinger noted, the party returned to the older pattern that characterized the conservative and plutocratic Whigs. During the Gilded Age, the narrow interests of big business controlled the Republican Party and the nation experienced a leadership crisis while the Democratic Party recovered from the trauma of the Civil War. For a time it appeared that a “responsible conservatism” might rise in the Republican Party with the

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<sup>17</sup> Schlesinger, "The Democratic Party," 34.

ascendancy of Theodore Roosevelt, but by the twenties it was clear that big business and “Republican fundamentalism” dominated the party. In contrast, the New Deal saw a return of dynamic and pragmatic, as well as liberal, leadership in the Democratic Party.

The key to Schlesinger’s understanding of American history was what he called the “Vital Center.” The term first appeared in a *New York Times Magazine* article in 1948 and provided a title for his famous 1949 book describing his vision of liberalism.<sup>18</sup> The Vital Center was not simply a version of moderate liberalism. Schlesinger re-conceptualized the model of left-right dichotomy. He described the traditional idea of the political left and right on a linear continuum, with extreme radicalism or revolutionary socialism at the extreme left and fascism at the extreme right, as a circle instead of a straight line. In his model the extremes of fascism and revolutionary socialism, or communism, were tied together and formed the totalitarian bottom of the circle, while the moderate left and right formed the democratic top of the circle.<sup>19</sup> Thus fascism and communism were geometrically (and therefore politically) closer to one another than either was to a moderate conservatism or a democratic liberalism. “A united left is an illusion,” explained Schlesinger; “the question of freedom vs. totalitarianism cannot be compromised.”<sup>20</sup>

Schlesinger was doing more than cutting the left out of the moderate liberal coalition; he understood the “Vital Center” as the only possibility for liberal reform. The Vital Center was not just a golden mean between two dysfunctional extremes. It was a

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<sup>18</sup> Schlesinger, *The Vital Center*; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., “Not Left, Not Right, But a Vital Center,” *New York Times Magazine*, April 4, 1948, 7+.

<sup>19</sup> Schlesinger credits DeWitt C. Poole, an American diplomat who Schlesinger knew as chief of the Foreign Nationalities Branch of the OSS, as the originator of the circle model of left and right. Schlesinger, *A Life in the Twentieth Century: Innocent Beginnings, 1917-1950*, 509-510.

<sup>20</sup> Schlesinger, “Not Left, Not Right, But a Vital Center.”

philosophical, as well as a political position. Schlesinger was influenced by the American theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, whose work depicted the paradox of a human nature divided and torn between its spiritual and natural aspects. For Niebuhr the tragedy of human existence was that as spiritual beings, humans could imagine a utopian existence, but as animals rooted in nature, and as self-interested creatures, humans could never achieve their lofty goals.<sup>21</sup> Schlesinger found in Niebuhr the inspiration for the Vital Center. “Man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible,” Schlesinger quoted Niebuhr, “but man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.”<sup>22</sup> The Vital Center was the vantage point, the political position, and philosophical system that recognized the flawed nature of human beings and accepted the inevitability of conflict and – more importantly – the irresolvable nature of human conflict, without succumbing to despair, and thus preserving the possibility for action and progress.<sup>23</sup>

Niebuhr’s theology was certainly compatible with Trilling’s anti-radicalism, but there were important differences between the two positions. As Schlesinger has admitted, Niebuhr’s austere philosophy was fundamentally religious; his most important message was the necessity and mystery of God’s grace. Grace, though, was something in which modern liberal intellectuals were unwilling to believe. As William Barrett noted, secularism was considered by liberal intellectuals to be an irresistible condition of modernity, and more often than not, faith was regarded by liberals (especially Trilling) as

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<sup>21</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., “Niebuhr Vision of Our Time,” *The Nation*, June 22, 1946, 753-754. Schlesinger explained the influence that Niebuhr had on his concept of the “Vital Center” in his memoir, see Schlesinger, *A Life in the Twentieth Century: Innocent Beginnings, 1917-1950*, 511-513. Schlesinger especially cites Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 2 vols., (New York, 1941, 1943).

<sup>22</sup> Schlesinger, *The Vital Center*, 170. For the original quotation, see, Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and The Children of Darkness*, (New York, 1944, 1960), xiii.

<sup>23</sup> Schlesinger, *The Vital Center*, 255.

a symptom of an immature personality.<sup>24</sup> Yet Niebuhr's beliefs exerted a powerful influence on many intellectuals. Schlesinger has described the theologian's outlook as Augustinian and linked it with view of many other mid-century liberal intellectuals, such as Perry Miller, George Kennan, and Morton White – White once quipped to Schlesinger that they ought to form an organization called “atheists for Niebuhr.”<sup>25</sup> All of these intellectuals appreciated Niebuhr for the way he deflated the confidence of the modern progressive in the power of science and the righteousness of Enlightenment philosophy. Niebuhr's theology enabled mid-century liberals to consider the flaws in their progressivism and contemplate the possible advantages of conservative points of view. Schlesinger did this quite literately when he described the “responsible” conservatism of the British Tories, who he believed – unlike their American counterparts – possessed a genuine aristocratic tradition and a sense of *noblesse oblige* that enabled them to transcend class interests. He saw in the Tories a concern for community that was not only lacking in American conservatism, but often overlooked by individualistic-minded American liberals.<sup>26</sup>

Given their mutual Anglophilia, their desire to incorporate aspects of conservatism in their liberalism, and their political antipathy toward the radical left, Trilling and Schlesinger were natural allies. It appears that their relationship began with Schlesinger writing a jacket quote for Trilling's novel, *The Middle of the Journey*.<sup>27</sup> During the next few years, as the debate on the nature of liberalism intensified, the two

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<sup>24</sup> Barrett, *The Truants: Adventures Among Intellectuals*, 182.

<sup>25</sup> Schlesinger, *A Life in the Twentieth Century: Innocent Beginnings, 1917-1950*, 513.

<sup>26</sup> Schlesinger, *The Vital Center*, 15-16. Also see, Schlesinger, "Political Culture in the United States," 306-309.

<sup>27</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. to Pascal Covici, 26 August 1947, Box 5, Lionel Trilling Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

men became friendly with one another. Chase also knew Schlesinger personally. In fact, he was quite taken with him. “He’s amazing,” Chase reported to Trilling, after Schlesinger visited Connecticut College. He is, added Chase, “an eighteenth century buck and a man of reason with an appropriate arrogance and coarseness” who “swore freely in the presence of the lady professors.”<sup>28</sup> For his part, Schlesinger thanked Chase for the favorable mention in Chase’s article on the *Confidence Man* and agreed with its take on Melville, noting that in his soon-to-be published book, *The Vital Center*, he described Hawthorne and Melville as examples of “profound representatives of our democratic tradition.”<sup>29</sup>

As agreeable as Schlesinger’s point of view was to Chase and Trilling, their view was not exactly the same as his. Schlesinger was far more concerned with politics than either Chase or Trilling. And while there was undoubtedly a strong anti-radical element in Schlesinger’s post-war writings, the anti-radical modernism that was characteristic of Trilling’s thought was not his dominant theme. Also Schlesinger’s polemic was not a coherent ideology, but in many ways more of a political strategy designed to promote a set of particular policies -- the Cold War and the continuation of the New Deal – rather than a broad reevaluation of modern politics. Trilling, in contrast, was promoting an ideology that, in addition to political goals, had a clear cultural vision. While Trilling respected Schlesinger and found him a charismatic personality, he made a distinction between Schlesinger’s rather narrow political program and his own political-cultural vision. He told Chase that although he saw Schlesinger’s political philosophy as

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<sup>28</sup> Richard Chase to Lionel Trilling, March 17, 1949.

<sup>29</sup> Schlesinger to Richard Chase, 24 January 1949, Box 2 - Richard Chase Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

“unique,” it was not “complex or difficult.” According to Trilling, Schlesinger “knew as a politico” what he and Chase knew as literary and cultural critics.<sup>30</sup>

What Trilling was alluding to was that at the heart of Schlesinger’s approach to politics was the same progressive worldview – with its simplistic Manichean dichotomies and naïve teleology --that Trilling condemned in his critique of Parrington. It is ironic that although Schlesinger is associated with the anti-radical tide of the post-war era, as a historian in the 1940s he was one of the last adherents of the progressive school. Like the progressive historians of the early twentieth century (including his father), Schlesinger understood American history as a struggle between the forces of progress, or liberalism, or democracy, and the forces of reaction and oligarchy. In the book that made his reputation, *The Age of Jackson* (1945), he described the Jackson administration as not only the political antecedent of the contemporary Democratic Party, but also as a direct ideological ancestor to the New Deal. Like FDR, Schlesinger’s Jackson battled the reactionary and elitist “economic royalists” of the Northeast and defended the common people against a predatory plutocracy.<sup>31</sup> This is the argument that the historian used in his election year articles on the Republican and Democratic parties. For Schlesinger, the fundamental nature of American political conflict did not change – it was a struggle between a dynamic liberalism and a stagnant conservatism. Occasionally the major parties switched roles, but the essential story was always the same.

Given the strong anti-radical theme running through Schlesinger’s work in the late forties, his ironic adherence to the progressive model of history seems out of place. Stephan Depoe has identified the main sources of Schlesinger’s ideology, or “frame of

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<sup>30</sup> Lionel Trilling to Richard Chase, 21 March [1949].

<sup>31</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson*, (Boston, 1945).

reference,” as Reinhold Niebuhr, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and the historian’s father.<sup>32</sup> Of the three, the influence of Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., was by far the most important. It is tempting to see the work of Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. as a synthesis of progressive and anti-radical sensibilities that grew out of the early Cold War, but the fact is that virtually the entire historical framework that he used was constructed by his father before the Second World War. It was Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., who modified the progressive dichotomy to condemn extremism on the left as well as on the right. Furthermore, he espoused the idea of a “middle zone” of democratic politics that anticipated the Vital Center.<sup>33</sup> The senior Schlesinger also developed a unique teleology that the younger Schlesinger utilized not just to analyze American political history, but actually to predict the country’s political future. Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., believed that American history followed regular cycles in which conservative and liberal politics were alternatively ascendant. This cycle was quite regular and predictable, averaging about 16.6 years each cycle.<sup>34</sup> Although this model suggests the movement of a pendulum as opposed to the model of linear progress favored by most progressives, the senior Schlesinger insisted that the cycles did not revolve around a fixed point. Instead there was constant progress, because the ascendant conservatives always adopted, at the least, the rhetoric of the previous liberal ascendancy, if not the policies. Furthermore, the liberal ascendancy always followed and to a large extent was caused by the electorate’s disappointment with the conservative party’s inability or unwillingness to implement the policies implied by the liberal rhetoric that

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<sup>32</sup> Stephen P. Depoe, *Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and the Ideological History of American Liberalism*, (Tuscaloosa, 1994), 1-15.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 7. Also see, Arthur Meier Schlesinger, [Sr.], *New Viewpoints in American History*, (New York, 1922), 107.

<sup>34</sup> See Arthur M. Schlesinger, “The Tides of National Politics,” in Arthur Meier Schlesinger, [Sr.], *Paths to the Present*, rev. ed. ed., (Boston, 1964), 89-103. The essay was originally written in 1939.

had been adopted from the previous liberal ascendancy. Thus, explained the elder Schlesinger, “liberalism grows constantly more liberal and by the same token, conservatism grows constantly less conservative; the process is not only periodic but progressive.”<sup>35</sup>

Despite his idiosyncratic cyclical theory of history, the senior Schlesinger remained true to his sympathy for the political orientation and historical analysis of his fellow early twentieth-century progressive historians. He only slightly modified their teleological outlook by describing the progression of American history as a spiral rather than a straight line. Moreover, Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., maintained a considerably more optimistic view of history compared to many of his fellow progressives, who on the whole were in a state of despair during the conservative 1920s. Schlesinger, Sr., in contrast, not only confidently predicted the return of liberals to political power, but also by assigning to the conservatives a positive historical role, he made their temporary ascendancy more palatable. While the American “ship of state has moved by fits and starts,” the historian believed that this process had given the country periods of “imaginative leadership, of experimentations and democratic innovation,” followed by periods of “sober reflection, of digestion of the gains and renewed vigilance for the rights of property.”<sup>36</sup> American history was, in short, a moderate, self-correcting, yet progressive process. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., added to this analysis the concept of a generational procession, but he followed the basic outline described by his father.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 102-103.

<sup>37</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Cycles of American History*, (Boston, 1986), 23-48.

Throughout his career, the younger Schlesinger confidently asserted the “inevitability” of American liberalism.<sup>38</sup>

The dominant theme of *The Vital Center* is the limitations of liberalism. The book is suffused with a Niebuhrian understanding of original sin and the belief that conflict and progress are inexorably tied together.<sup>39</sup> Schlesinger called for a “new radicalism” that recognized the imperfect nature of humanity and discarded the illusions and ideology of the progressive era for a realistic appreciation of conflict and struggle. “The choice we face is not between progress with conflict and progress without conflict,” he explained. “The choice is between conflict and stagnation. You cannot expel conflict from society any more than you can from the human mind.”<sup>40</sup> The idea that there was an imminent resolution to the conflict between the varied interests and groups of society was, Schlesinger argued, a dangerous utopian illusion. Instead the new post-war realistically minded liberal had to accept and embrace the idea that, at best, the future would yield a series of temporary settlements based on compromise and the self-interests of the varied components of society.

What Schlesinger called the “new radicalism” was a dramatic departure from the pre-war radicalism that envisioned a remade American society. By using Niebuhr’s language and sociological outlook, Schlesinger outlined a liberal realism that echoed the anti-radicalism of Trilling and other post-war intellectuals. Yet for all the Niebuhrian realism of *The Vital Center*, what lay beneath Schlesinger’s political and historical outlook was actually a rather old-fashioned and optimistic progressivism. The historian accepted the progressive teleology and the idea that history has a logic that would

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<sup>38</sup> Depoe, *Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and the Ideological History of American Liberalism*, 12-13.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-7.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7; Schlesinger, *The Vital Center*, 235.

inexorably create a better society. Although Schlesinger did not believe in a socialist revolution, this was not because he believed that capitalism was superior to socialism or that a mixed economy more realistically accommodated the conflict inherent in human society than a purely socialist economy. On the contrary, he was convinced that the United States would eventually turn to social democracy and that this change would come gradually, peacefully, and inevitably.<sup>41</sup> Like the “well loved child of the middle class” described in Trilling’s novel, *The Middle of the Journey*, who was “taught about the future by the means of the promises made to him,” Schlesinger’s understanding of history was based on his belief that the future promised “growth and change” and always progress.<sup>42</sup> Also, like the same child who looked toward the gifts provided by his parents for fulfillment of the future, Schlesinger relied on the emergence of heroic leadership to move history forward on its teleological track. Franklin D. Roosevelt was for Schlesinger the paradigmatic example of a heroic leader who provided the dynamic leadership needed to overcome the conflict inherent in society and implement the reforms needed to propel history forward.<sup>43</sup> For all his rhetorical realism, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., was in many ways quite idealistic. While he may not have had any faith in a traditional religious sense, nor faith in the modern utopian sense, he nevertheless had faith in history – faith in the idea of not just heroic, even transcendent, leadership, but more importantly, faith that this leadership was a historical imperative.

Trilling’s anti-radicalism had no place for Schlesinger’s faith -- or, for that matter, just about any type of faith that went beyond a modest reliance on reason. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., may have had an extraordinary ability to create a persuasive anti-radical

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<sup>41</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "The Future of Socialism: III," *Partisan Review* (May-June, 1947), 229-242.

<sup>42</sup> Trilling, *The Middle of the Journey*, 139.

<sup>43</sup> Depoe, *Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and the Ideological History of American Liberalism*, 9-10.

rhetoric, but he did not provide a genuine anti-radical understanding of American history. The problem was that Schlesinger maintained a version of Progressive teleology. A genuine anti-radical conception of American history demanded an anti-teleological, or a post-teleological, outlook. It also required an abandonment of the ideological Manichaeism – that is, the conception that history is characterized by a struggle between progressive or democratic forces and reactionary forces -- that distinguished progressive historiography. Schlesinger may have modified the progressive teleology and ideological Manichaeism, but he did not discard them completely. For a purer anti-radical interpretation of American history, one must turn to a contemporary of Schlesinger, who, like Trilling, was a Columbia University professor and associated with the New York intellectuals – Richard Hofstadter

When Richard Hofstadter's ground-breaking book, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It*, was published in 1948, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., declared that it "signaled the appearance of a new talent of first-rate ability in the writing of American history."<sup>44</sup> This was a magnanimous appraisal by Schlesinger, for *The American Political Tradition* challenged Schlesinger's belief that one could clearly discern throughout American history a continuous liberal tradition in opposition to the forces of reaction. Indeed, Hofstadter's book was in many ways a manifesto announcing the death of progressive historiography. The book's introduction would be seen later as the first description of the so-called consensus school that dominated American historiography during the 1950s. While Schlesinger could not foresee exactly how influential *The American Political Tradition* would become, he realized that Hofstadter's

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<sup>44</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It," *The American Historical Review* 54 (April, 1949): 612-613.

emphasis on “the common climate of opinion” – as opposed to political and ideological conflict -- contradicted his own progressive-derived conception of American history as the story of the conflict between, as Emerson put it, a “party of hope” and a “party of memory.” “Mr. Hofstadter in his introduction,” Schlesinger incredulously declared, “happily resolves American political conflict into a shared belief ‘in the rights of property, the philosophy of economic individualism, [and] the values of competition.’”<sup>45</sup>

Schlesinger’s summary may have been a bit succinct, but it was fair. Hofstadter insisted that there was a need to reinterpret American history. He argued that the previous generation of historians had wrongly placed “conflict at the forefront of history” and lost sight of the important consensus that characterized American society.<sup>46</sup> This “common climate of opinion” was described by Hofstadter as the widespread acceptance by Americans – past and present – of the “economic virtues of capitalist culture.” He argued that Americans understood these virtues as the only sound basis on which a stable, free, and prosperous society could be built. Furthermore, Hofstadter insisted that genuine left-wing radicalism played a limited role in American history and that the apparently intense political conflicts that seemed to typify American history actually “boiled down to very modest minimums” in terms of practical policy.<sup>47</sup> These basic premises – that American history and culture were characterized by an ideological consensus built around capitalism, that radical anti-capitalist ideas and movements played a limited role in American history and that the apparent conflicts of American history masked fundamental agreement and an uninterrupted and steady development of a capitalist

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 613.

<sup>46</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition, and the Men who Made It*, Twenty-fifth Anniversary Edition with forward by Christopher Lasch (1973) ed., (New York, 1948), xxix.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., xxx.

economy – became the basis of what would later be described as the consensus school of history.

Although by the end of the 1950s the consensus school would be associated with Cold War triumphalism, Hofstadter never thought very highly of the American consensus.<sup>48</sup> Instead he described it in *The American Political Tradition* as a constant impediment that imposed upon the country a culture that was on the whole, “intensely nationalistic,” isolationist, “fiercely individualistic,” and, above all, capitalistic. In a world that, by the middle of the twentieth century, was becoming increasingly “corporate and consolidated,” and demanded “international responsibility, cohesion, centralization, and planning,” the traditional American culture not only provided little guidance but hindered the ability of Americans to develop the institutions and political strategies necessary for survival. “In this time of cultural crisis,” Hofstadter argued, it was imperative to “gain fresh perspective on the past.”<sup>49</sup> Thus, *The American Political Tradition* was not written to celebrate American exceptionalism. On the contrary, it was an exercise in historical debunking that was designed to expose the limited horizons of American culture and politics and counteract the large “literature of hero-worship and national self-congratulation” that preceded it.<sup>50</sup> To do this, Hofstadter deflated the heroes of American liberalism, including Schlesinger’s favorite, Andrew Jackson. In stark contrast to Schlesinger’s depiction of Jackson as a forerunner of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Hofstadter portrayed Old Hickory as a caricature of that most popular American archetype, the “self-made man,” as well as an aristocratic-minded politician who cared

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<sup>48</sup> John Higham, "The Cult of the 'American Consensus'," *Commentary* 27 (February, 1959): 93-100. Higham’s article was one of the earliest critiques of the consensus school, and prefigured the eclipse of the school during the sixties.

<sup>49</sup> Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition, and the Men who Made It*, xxxii.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxiii.

little about the material welfare of the “common man.” As for Jackson’s battle against the Bank of the United States, Hofstadter maintained that was not the great democratic reform that Schlesinger described, but rather a reckless and personally motivated campaign that precipitated decades of chronic monetary instability, which was not fully corrected until the New Deal.<sup>51</sup>

Even when it came to a man both he and Schlesinger admired, Hofstadter paid what can only be described as a left-handed tribute. He argued that Franklin D. Roosevelt managed to transcend the American political tradition of faith in capitalism because he lacked firm principles of his own to begin with.<sup>52</sup> Unfortunately, while Roosevelt was able to recognize that capitalism in the United States had failed and had enough political savvy to embark on bold experiments, if for no other reason than simple political expediency, Hofstadter lamented that Roosevelt never developed a coherent and comprehensive program. The president’s greatness was, in fact, a sign of American weakness. In the absence of a coherent political-economic program and a new set of values suited for modernity, the American people turned to heroic leadership only in despair. Hofstadter concluded that “it was the very lack of confidence in the American future” as well as a lack “of a positive program of ideas” that “increased popular faith in the wonder-working powers of the great man.”<sup>53</sup> If for Schlesinger the heroic liberal leader was a historical imperative, it was for Hofstadter simply a historical accident with limited transformative implications.

In a review of *The American Political Tradition*, one of the triumvirate of Smith College professors who would incite with their angry letter to the editor the intense

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 62-63.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 311-347.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 347.

debate in *Partisan Review* over Lionel Trilling and Richard Chase's attack on liberalism, Daniel Aaron, declared that the book "was one of the most remarkable pieces of historical writing to be published during the last ten years." Aaron, a professor of English, found Hofstadter's prose outstandingly succinct and memorable. But the reviewer's praise was not without reservations. While the biographical sketches contained in the book may have been written with wit and demonstrated a "brilliantly interpretive synthesis of historical scholarship," Aaron challenged the assertion that *The American Political Tradition* was an "unorthodox re-evaluation" of American history. Quite the contrary, Aaron feared that the book's thesis would be interpreted as "an exercise in historical piety" and misunderstood as a celebration of basic American values. Even more disturbing, however, was what Aaron saw as Hofstadter's portrait of the successful American leader. In contrast with Schlesinger's vision of heroic liberal and progressive leader, the most successful figures in *The American Political Tradition* were those leaders who were most "opportunistic, adroit, and crafty" and who made sure never to "outrage the prejudices of their constituents." Although he may have feared that the book would be understood as a conservative defense of American ideology, Aaron could not quite identify Hofstadter's ideological position. Clearly, the book contained a sharp critique of American culture, and Aaron sympathized with Hofstadter's call to look at the problems of contemporary society through "our own eyes and not through the eyes of our forefathers." Yet Aaron could not help but wonder exactly how much of the past we ought to repudiate. "Mr. Hofstadter is not very explicit about what he considers usable or worthless in our political past," Aaron asked. "Does he repudiate the traditional pragmatic approach to politics along with the capitalistic orientation of the politicians?" It

was a question that was not directly answered in *The American Political Tradition*, but Aaron suspected that Hofstadter was hinting that in addition to dropping the doctrinaire attachment to individualistic capitalism, much of the idealism of the progressive era, especially the faith in the ability of American political culture to generate intelligent and disinterested leadership, ought to be discarded by modern Americans as well.<sup>54</sup>

Aaron's suspicions were justified. Hofstadter's success with *The American Political Tradition* signaled the beginning of the ascendancy of what Gene Wise has called the "counter-progressives."<sup>55</sup> Wise does not use the term "counter-progressive" in a broad political sense, as in a conservative movement that sought to "counter" or overturn the progressive political successes of the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>56</sup> Instead, he refers to a limited group of intellectuals, who in the middle of the twentieth century challenged the basic assumptions of the progressive historians. This challenge is directly related to the anti-radicalism – or more precisely, the anti-radical modernism – of intellectuals such as Trilling and Chase. Indeed, Wise identifies Trilling's 1940 essay on Parrington as one of the earliest counter-progressive critiques of progressive history. This essay describes the basic difference between the progressive and counter-progressive sensibilities.<sup>57</sup> According to Trilling, Parrington had a too narrow a conception of reality and experience, and misunderstood the relationship of one to the

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<sup>54</sup> Daniel Aaron, "The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It," *American Quarterly* 1 (Spring, 1949), 94-96.

<sup>55</sup> Gene Wise, *American Historical Explanations: A Strategy for Grounded Inquiry*, 2nd, revised ed., (Minneapolis, 1980), 223-295.

<sup>56</sup> Wise use of the term "counter-progressive" is similar to my use of the terms "anti-radicalism" and "anti-radical modernism." We both use these terms to convey an intellectual mindset rather than a political agenda. This is not to say that there is no political agenda attached to this intellectual mindset but one must avoid conflating the two. On the other hand, Peter Novick describes the intellectual outlook of the counter-progressives much the same as Wise; however, he also explicitly attaches a larger political program to this outlook and identifies the "counter-progressives" with the "new conservatives" and "neo-conservatism" of the 1950s. See Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession*, (New York, 1988), 370.

<sup>57</sup> Trilling, "Parrington, Mr. Smith and Reality," 24-40; Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, 3-20.

other. Those authors who explored the paradoxical relationship between experience and reality, or concentrated on the interior dimension of experience, were invariably dismissed by Parrington as too romantic and unrealistic. The disagreement between Parrington and Trilling was indicative of the fundamental difference between the progressives and the counter-progressives. While the progressives insisted that there was a direct and common-sense relationship between reality and experience (and those progressives who considered themselves pragmatists believed that experience was reality), the counter-progressives believed that there was a difficult and paradoxical relationship between reality and experience. In fact, Wise goes as far as to declare that “for the counter-Progressive, experience *is* basically paradox.”<sup>58</sup> Thus for Trilling the author who explored the paradox of disjointed and discontinuous experience – what Trilling described in the case of E.M. Forster as those moments in which “panic and emptiness” are exposed – is superior to the author that represents experience naturally, or “realistically.” Furthermore, the superior author demonstrated a more sophisticated realism – that is, the superior “realism” of the “moral imagination,” which Trilling prized above all else in an author.<sup>59</sup>

Although Trilling was one of the earliest critics to question the basic beliefs of the progressives, Hofstadter was one of the first historians to suggest that the progressive assumptions about reality and its relation to experience led to a distorted understanding of American history. The broad theme of *The American Political Tradition* is not just how the American perception of history and experience differs from the reality, but also how American perceptions and ideas shaped the experience to begin with. Hofstadter

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<sup>58</sup> Wise, *American Historical Explanations: A Strategy for Grounded Inquiry*, 229.

<sup>59</sup> Lionel Trilling, *E. M. Forster*, 2d. ed., (New York, 1965), 157.

discarded the simplistic progressive belief in a direct correspondence between reality and experience, and instead concentrated on how American experience has been shaped by oddly fixed cultural values. Just as Trilling believed that the proper subject of the literary critic should be how well an author addresses the tension and paradox inherent in a novel's characters, Hofstadter believed that a historian must identify the tensions, contradictions, and paradoxes of historical experience. He observed that while there has been in the past century and a half momentous change in the material conditions and social structures in which Americans lived, there was relatively little change in the way Americans conceptualized and organized their experience. Despite progressive claims, it appeared that there was actually very little "progress" in the mental world of Americans. The same basic ideological structures and mental categories – the same basic "climate of opinion," as Hofstadter put it – seems to have dominated the culture of the nation from the earliest days of the republic until the present.

Occasionally, a cultural or even a political leader would emerge and present the country with a genuine alternative vision. For Hofstadter, though, these exceptions were not the great leaders, but rather, on the whole, the great failures of American history. For example, in *The American Political Tradition* Hofstadter identified -- from the left and the right, respectively – Wendell Phillips and John C. Calhoun as figures who genuinely challenged the basic American cultural and political assumptions. But their lasting impact, like that of most such figures, was rather limited. According to Hofstadter, American leaders could not usually bridge the gap between American perceptions of experience and reality. What was needed, he believed was not a progressive understanding of a usable past that celebrated the liberal elements of American history

and provided inspiration to its leaders, but rather a complete break with the past, or an end to the teleological conceptions of the progressives and instead a resigned acknowledgment of the uniqueness of modernity. Franklin D. Roosevelt's great strength as a leader was that he was able to do this; his weakness was that he was unable to formulate a coherent set of values that could enable the country as a whole to transcend its past.

This is a decidedly less optimistic understanding of American history than what Schlesinger envisioned. Yet in a sense his vision of a Vital Center helped prepare the way for the counter-progressive historians. It also laid the foundation for the transformation of the counter-progressivism from a critique of American culture to the triumphalism that would be later associated with the consensus school. While Schlesinger may have been dedicated to a progressive approach to history, his political polemic suggested the utility of ideological consensus over oppositional politics. Of course, Schlesinger's consensus was a liberal consensus informed by his and his father's understanding of the privileged position of liberal-progressivism in American history. In their view the conservative ideological elements in American culture were ultimately small and played a limited role in American politics. Indeed, the historical role of American conservatives was for Schlesinger remarkably similar to the role that the Communist Party seemed to be playing in American politics during the late 1940s. Both groups were, according to Schlesinger, politically marginal and represented a narrow set of either provincial interests in the case of the conservatives or foreign interests as in the case of the modern communists. That is why Schlesinger rather cheekily described the fellow traveler of his day as a "Doughfaced progressive," after the Doughfaces (pro-

southern northern Democrats) of the 1850s.<sup>60</sup> There was no need, in Schlesinger's mind, to worry about the ability of progressive leadership to guide American politics. He implicitly rejected the counter-progressive understanding of American culture and ideology as being essentially static and frozen. Instead he believed that a dialectic between conservatism and liberalism, in which the liberal elements were always stronger, moved American culture forward.

Hofstadter thought he knew better. Unlike Schlesinger, who believed that the liberal-progressive worldview dominated American culture and this culture would inevitably produce the political leadership that was need to navigate society skillfully through modernity, Hofstadter believed that the perennial gap between American perception and reality meant that the nation's political leadership tended to be too timid and more often than not too ill-informed to be an effective agent of change. Furthermore, in stark contrast with Schlesinger's vision of a stable Vital Center, Hofstadter feared that the ideological consensus of the country, ironically, bred a unique form of political extremism – on both the left and the right – that seemed to threaten the stability and progress of American society.

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<sup>60</sup> Schlesinger, *The Vital Center*, 48-44.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### **The Sources of Richard Hofstadter's Anti-Radicalism**

In a summary of Hofstadter's career written twenty years after the publication of *The American Political Tradition*, Schlesinger, although still no more reconciled to Hofstadter's consensus view of American history, was a bit more analytical than he was in 1948.<sup>1</sup> Schlesinger did somewhat dismissively describe the book as aimed at the "reading public," rather than academic historians, but he admitted that he admired its "literary" effectiveness and recognized its historiographical importance. He also noted that Hofstadter always approached the American ideological consensus from a "radical perspective" and differentiated Hofstadter from the more vulgar practitioners of consensus history, such as Daniel Boorstin, who seemed to venerate the ideological limitations of American political culture. But Schlesinger still believed, perhaps even more so than he did in 1948, that Hofstadter's understanding of American history was fundamentally flawed. The problem, according to Schlesinger, was that Hofstadter focused too narrowly on the intellectual and cultural origins of American politics at the expense of a careful examination of the "practical consequences" of policy. For example, Andrew Jackson and his Whig opponents may both have used rhetoric that drew upon shared tradition of eighteenth-century republicanism, but the differences in their policies and the different interests groups that benefited from these policies were nonetheless very real. Schlesinger feared that Hofstadter's iconoclastic approach toward history tended to

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "Richard Hofstadter," in *Pastmasters*, ed. Marcus Cunliffe and Robin W. Winks (New York, 1969), 278-315.

“drain meaning from American political conflict” and blur important and real distinctions.<sup>2</sup>

After noting that Hofstadter was “one of the first major American historians to come out of the cultural life of New York City,” Schlesinger wondered if “it is perhaps not too fanciful to suppose, [that] he reflected the special preoccupations and opportunities of an historian living in so varied, intense and contemporary a city as New York.”<sup>3</sup> This is an interesting supposition, and it undoubtedly reflected a great deal of truth, given Hofstadter’s connection with the larger New York intellectual community. But Schlesinger’s speculation also suggests a mild snobbery on his part. One cannot avoid thinking that Schlesinger -- with historians on both sides of his family, a midwestern childhood, and an adolescence and early adulthood spent in the seat of New England’s proud Brahmin intellectual tradition at Harvard -- was implying that he was somehow more qualified to judge the American political tradition than the New Yorker Hofstadter, who had spent just about all of his adult life in a cosmopolitan (perhaps even bohemian) enclave that was separated from the mainstream of American culture. And yet Schlesinger also hit upon a fundamental truth: that is, that Hofstadter’s work was an expression of a profound alienation from American culture and politics and a deep-seated skepticism toward its more democratic impulses.

Like many figures associated with New York City, Richard Hofstadter came from the provinces, specifically Buffalo, New York. He was born on August 6, 1916, to Emil and Catherine Hofstadter. Emil was Jewish and originally from Poland. He came to New York City as a child with his family in 1894. In 1904, at age sixteen, Emil left his

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 287-289.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 294.

home and family, and eventually settled in Buffalo, where he married the daughter of a prosperous middle-class German-American family, Catherine Hill. Although Emil insisted that they be married by a rabbi, his family never accepted his gentile wife, and Richard and his sister, Betty, were baptized in the Lutheran Church. Later, his mother and his aunt (her sister) began attending an Episcopal Church. Richard and Betty were confirmed in this church, where Richard also performed as a choir boy. Even his father Emil occasionally attended services, further estranging Richard from his Jewish heritage.

In 1926 tragedy struck the family when Catherine died. Understandably the loss of his mother was quite traumatic, and Hofstadter always claimed that he could not remember much of his childhood until high school. But beyond this tragedy, Hofstadter's childhood seems to have been comfortable enough. His father was reasonably successful, although not inordinately so, and he provided a respectable middle-class existence for his family. If Richard's childhood was stressful, or if as one biographer has suggested, there was a history of family discord, there is no evidence that Richard was gravely affected. He did well in school and was class president when he was a senior in high school. Overall, Hofstadter appears to have been a bright and popular student who had an interest in extracurricular activities, which led him to become a cheerleader, join the debate team – at which he did extremely well – and even write a play for school presentation. When in the fall of 1933 Richard entered the University of Buffalo, he was expected to academically excel and eventually go to law school.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Susan Stout Baker, *Radical Beginnings: Richard Hofstadter and the 1930s*, (Westport, Conn., 1985), 3-25. On the issue of family discord, Baker writes: “The family knew periods that were less than tranquil, however. One of Catherine's younger sisters died during Richard Hofstadter's childhood, and Catherine's daughter remembers the pain of her mother's grief. Also, Emil and Catherine did not always see eye to eye. Emil possessed a ‘terrible temper’ and vented it on his family” (p.10). Baker quotes Hofstadter's sister, Betty Goodfriend in a 1981 interview. Betty was born in 1919 and was about seven when her mother died.

At the University of Buffalo, Richard Hofstadter met his first wife, Felice Swados. Felice was from a well-off Jewish family. Her father was a doctor in Buffalo, and her mother came from a prominent Jewish medical family from New York City. Both her parents displayed a concern for the social welfare of the community. Felice followed their example to a more extreme degree by becoming deeply involved in the student radical movement. She was a prominent member of the Student League for Industrial Democracy (SLID) and the National Student League (NSL). Although the SLID was a socialist-dominated organization and the NSL had close ties to the American Communist Party, both organizations were heavily influenced by the extreme revolutionary stance of the party during its so-called “Third Period” (1927-1935) and coordinated their political activities with each other. Reflecting the radicalism of the period, the SLID and the NSL rejected the New Deal as a compromise of socialist principles. They denounced the League of Nations as a coalition of reactionary and anti-Soviet states, and they were zealously committed to pacifism.

Hofstadter met Felice through the Iron Room Circle, which was named for a room in the Buffalo Student Union where radical students regularly met.<sup>5</sup> As their relationship grew, Hofstadter became more involved with student radicalism. By 1936, he was president of the NSL. Felice, in turn, became involved in the Young Communist League, and after she went to New York City for graduate school, she was assigned by them to work with the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU). Hofstadter and Felice were separated for a year in 1936, but they resolved to marry and live together in New York while Richard went to law school.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 28-36.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 73.

Although his wife may have been more politically active than he was, Hofstadter was seriously committed to the radical left cause while he was in college. Like many students during this period, Hofstadter was deeply troubled by the Depression and was convinced that capitalism was no longer viable. He also experienced a profound alienation with American politics. In fact, his experience and activities at the University of Buffalo mirrored the experience of many New York intellectuals at CCNY. And like many New York intellectuals, while Hofstadter would later abandon his radicalism, his sense of alienation would never quite leave him. Also, although Hofstadter eventually lost his enthusiasm for a socialist revolution, he continued to believe for the rest of his life that the 1930s signaled the death of traditional laissez-faire capitalism.

In addition to exposing Hofstadter to political radicalism, the University of Buffalo introduced him to the serious study of history. In 1934, he read Charles Beard's *The Rise of American Civilization*. This, plus his ongoing studies of Marxism, led Hofstadter to develop a distinctive Marxist understanding of American history. In addition to history he was drawn to the study of philosophy and was a dual philosophy and history major. Ultimately, however, Hofstadter found the field history more suited to his intellectual and political interests. His thesis advisor, Julius Pratt, was, as Hofstadter later described him, "a thoroughly professional historian," whose work was firmly grounded in thorough research and a "classic sense" of historical detachment. Pratt was best known for his book *The Expansionists of 1898* (1936), which was a measured examination of the efforts of imperialists to acquire Hawaii for the United States that displayed a progressive sensibility.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 39-45.

Hofstadter's senior thesis, "The Tariff and Homestead Issues in the Republican Campaign," reflected his advisor's influence, especially in terms of methodology and organization.<sup>8</sup> But a more important influence on Hofstadter was Charles Beard. His thesis set out to prove Beard's contention in *The Rise of American Civilization* that the root of the Civil War – and, indeed, all events in American history – could be found in the economic interests of the various factions of antebellum America, rather than geographical or sectional differences.<sup>9</sup> Using a crude form of statistical analysis, which would not be characteristic of his later work, Hofstadter demonstrated that although the capitalist and financial elite of the Northeast was divided during the election of 1860 between its desire to maintain the Union and its economic need for the protective tariff promised by the Republicans, in the Northwest farmers and immigrants voted for Lincoln because of their economic interest in the Homestead Act and, to a lesser extent, the tariff.<sup>10</sup>

In 1937 Hofstadter moved to New York and married Felice. The couple lived the bohemian existence typical of young New York radical intellectuals. Hofstadter's friend and neighbor at the time, Alfred Kazin, described them "as another left-wing couple in marital disarray."<sup>11</sup> There was tension between Felice and Richard over Felice's career ambitions and the fact that she was the primary bread winner. In addition to her political activities, Felice worked as a journalist and eventually got a job at *Time* magazine as one of its few women writers. Richard, in contrast, was a bit lost when he first arrived in the city. Originally, his plan was to attend law school while working as a clerk in a law firm.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 61-62.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 56-57.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 62-63.

<sup>11</sup> Alfred Kazin, *A Lifetime Burning in Every Moment*, (New York, 1996), 12.

There was a great deal of pressure from Hofstadter's father and his in-laws to become a lawyer. However, he found law school drearily dull and dropped out in 1937. At the same time he took some graduate classes in history at Columbia University as a part-time student, and in the fall of 1937 he became a full-time graduate student.<sup>12</sup>

While Hofstadter struggled to find a suitable career, he also struggled to make sense of an increasing chaotic and dangerous world. After the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War and the formation of the Popular Front, he followed the doctrines of the Communist Party and abandoned his pacifism by supporting an American commitment to collective security. He was not blindly following party instructions though. Hofstadter genuinely believed that the rise of Hitler presented the democratic world with an unprecedented danger. Only through collective security and the broad progressive coalition of the Popular Front could the threat of fascism be defeated. He was so convinced of the necessity of the Popular Front and the need to support the anti-fascist Soviet Union that Hofstadter continued to support Stalin during the purges, despite the fact that he was convinced that the Moscow Trials were, as he put it, a "frame-up."<sup>13</sup> Hofstadter was not alone. At this time – the high point of the Popular Front – there were few on the left who were openly challenging the Communist Party. Only a handful of Trotskyites and disillusioned Marxists suggested that the Soviet Union was a totalitarian country that was as morally corrupt as Nazi Germany. The acquiescence of the Western democracies at Munich in March 1938 only reinforced the belief of committed radicals such as Hofstadter that the only sure anti-fascist force in the world was the Soviet Union. In mid-1938, despite his reservations about Stalin's purges, Richard Hofstadter joined the

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<sup>12</sup> Baker, *Radical Beginnings: Richard Hofstadter and the 1930s*, 101-102.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

Communist Party because he believed that it was the only way to fight isolationism at home and support anti-fascism abroad.<sup>14</sup>

The psychological commitment that Hofstadter and other intellectuals made to communism during the 1930s was considerable. It appeared to them that the economic and political crisis of the time was bringing the modern age to a culmination. And they were desperate to do something and somehow make sure that when this culmination occurred, the world that followed would be worth living in. “The thirties were an age of faith,” explained Alfred Kazin, “and for a time, a great many people I knew and knew were soldiers of faith. We alone were pure. The only evil in the world was fascism.”<sup>15</sup>

Hofstadter may not have believed that he and his ideological comrades alone were pure, and he had enough historical perspective to know that fascism was not the only evil in the world. But he certainly believed that fascism was by far the greatest evil the world faced at that moment. Thus, when Stalin reversed his policy and signed a non-aggression pact with Hitler in August 1939, Hofstadter was one of the many intellectuals who were completely stunned and disillusioned by the event. He joined the Communist Party at the height of the purges, despite the fact that he suspected the trials were staged performances. And although Hofstadter quietly left the party in February 1939 because he found it impossible to deal with doctrinaire party members, he made sure that he did not “burn any bridges” and continued to support the Soviet Union.<sup>16</sup> While other former communists, as well as increasingly vocal anticommunist socialists, were publicly questioning the effectiveness of the Popular Front and the sincerity of the Soviet Union,

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>15</sup> Kazin, *A Lifetime Burning in Every Moment*, 11.

<sup>16</sup> Baker, *Radical Beginnings: Richard Hofstadter and the 1930s*, 141.

Hofstadter believed right until the signing of the non-aggression pact that a unified left was the only defense against fascism.<sup>17</sup>

His continued loyalty to the Soviet Union, despite his reservations about Stalin and his distaste for the party apparatchiks who seemed to Hofstadter to mindlessly parrot whatever Stalin said, made the shock of the Hitler-Stalin Pact all the more bitter for him. A month after the signing of the pact, after the Soviets occupied eastern Poland, Hofstadter was faced with the horrible realization that the Pact was more than just a nonaggression pact, but was, in fact, a military alliance. What disgusted him was not so much the perfidy of the Soviet government but rather the behavior of the party faithful, who used the most extreme and outrageous sophistry to justify their continued faith. "I used to sneer when I read that communism was a substitute for religion," Hofstadter bitterly wrote to his brother-in-law, "but I don't any more." Not only did Hofstadter believe that communism was a kind of religion, he concluded that "Marxism itself is pervaded with a quasi-religious teleology."<sup>18</sup> The idealism and hopes of 1930s radicalism had totally crumbled for Hofstadter. His response was to fall into political despair. For the immediate future he could only vainly hope that the United States would stay out of the war. Political action though seemed pointless. Hofstadter retreated from political involvement and would remain aloof from political activity until 1952, when he

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 146. Baker cites a letter, written in the May 27, 1939 issue of *The Nation*, announcing the formation of the anticommunist Committee for Cultural Freedom as an example of the growing disenchantment with the Soviet Union in the Left. She also cites the ill-timed response (published right after the announcement of the Hitler-Stalin Pact) from those who continued to support the Popular Front as evidence of the profound division that affected the Left. Baker insists that despite his leaving the Communist Party in February 1939, Hofstadter sympathized with the latter group, rather than the former, at the beginning of the summer of 1939. See, Louis Adamic, "Manifesto," *The Nation*, May 27, 1939, 626; Jay Allen and et al., "To the Active Supporters of Democracy and Peace," *The Nation*, August 26, 1939, 228.

<sup>18</sup> Baker, *Radical Beginnings: Richard Hofstadter and the 1930s*, 150.

publicly supported Adlai Stevenson for president. Until then, he concentrated on his work as a historian.

While Hofstadter was experiencing the emotional highs and lows of political commitment and disillusionment, he was simultaneously undergoing an intellectual transformation. When he began graduate school, Hofstadter was firmly committed to the historiographical outlook of the progressives. He wanted to write socially relevant history that focused on the economic roots of political and social change, as well as the evolution of class conflict in the United States. Yet, by the time Hofstadter finished his doctorate, he changed not only his topic of interest from economic and political history to intellectual history, he also had developed a more critical understanding of progressive historiography. Eventually, Hofstadter would become known as a great critic of the progressives, but this transformation took time. Indeed, Hofstadter always considered his work as part of a continuous tradition that began with the progressive historians.

Hofstadter admired Charles Beard more than any other progressive historian. Even before he decided to become a historian, Hofstadter demonstrated a fascination with Beard when he elaborated upon Beard's understanding of the economic causes of the Civil War in his senior thesis. But there was more to Hofstadter's admiration for Beard than a shared belief in economic determinism. Beard, perhaps better than any other historian of his generation, described an approach to history that was especially suited for the political goals of progressivism.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the emerging field of professional historians was dominated by German ideas regarding a "scientific" approach to history that emphasized the "objective" description of events and historical facts over any other

considerations. The methodology of the most famous of the German historians, Leopold Von Ranke -- summed up in his dictum to write history "as it had really been" -- was the model that most American academic historians followed.<sup>19</sup> Ignoring, or misunderstanding, the idealistic and extreme German nationalism of Ranke and his school, most American historians believed that the German method to be strictly scientific and morally objective. A detached description of events, usually narrowly defined as political or military history, and based on a detailed study of the documentary evidence, was considered an end to itself by these early American professional historians. Analysis and criticism were clearly secondary objectives -- if pursued at all -- of historical research and writing.

In the years before the First World War, Beard and other progressive historians rejected the Ranke's approach because of what they saw as its superficial historical analysis. Beginning with Frederick Jackson Turner's work on the effects of geography upon American history, the progressive historians looked beyond political events and the activities of notable figures and instead attempted to discern the underlying causes of history.<sup>20</sup> They sought to discover the tectonic forces that shaped events and gave direction to history. Turner's geographical determinism was profoundly influential. It provided a distinctly American interpretation that countered the popular Anglo-Saxon school that insisted that the origins of American culture and politics could be found in ancient Teutonic history. Turner also provided an example of how material and environmental factors shaped history. Yet, as influential as Turner's work was, his

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<sup>19</sup> Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession*, 26-31.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 93-108. Also see Wise, *American Historical Explanations: A Strategy for Grounded Inquiry*, 179-222; Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians*, Vintage Book edition 1970 ed., (New York, 1968).

geographical approach would not become the dominant paradigm of the progressive school. Instead economic determinism became the dominant paradigm.

Among American historians, Beard was the most outstanding example of an economic determinist. His background and education made him supremely qualified to examine the economic aspects of American history. While attending graduate school at Oxford University, Beard joined the British Labour Party and collaborated with Fabian socialists in creating the Ruskin House labor college. This experience was formative for Beard. His activities were never confined to writing history. Beard frequently worked with government and progressive activists on various reform projects. Indeed, it can be said that Beard was first a progressive reformer and second a historian.<sup>21</sup> Thus history was for Beard not merely a literary or academic exercise, it was an essential part of the progressive project. And since the progressive project was above all concerned with remedying the deleterious effects of industrialization, it was natural that Beard understood history from the viewpoint of economic determinism.

Like Marx, Beard understood the relationship of property to labor as the paramount factor in shaping society. They also both appreciated history as reflecting changes in the nature of the relationship between property and labor. However, while Marx and Beard clearly shared what can be broadly described as a belief in historical materialism, it is more accurate to describe Beard's work as paralleling and converging with Marxism rather than being Marxist in itself. Beard's approach was distinctly American and reflected not only recent progressive interests, but also long-held American cultural traits and concerns. Unlike Marx, Beard did not foresee violent revolution as

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<sup>21</sup> Clyde W. Barrow, *More Than a Historian: The Political and Economic Thought of Charles A. Beard*, (New Brunswick, NJ, 2000), 1-30. Also see Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians*, 167-206.

inevitable and perceived in American history a vibrant reform tradition that had the capability to gradually transform the United States into a more social just and democratic society. As a Progressive historian, Beard described the reformist and democratic tradition as being present from the inception of the republic and envisioned American history as a constant struggle between these democratic forces and the anti-democratic and reactionary forces of concentrated property interests.

Yet Beard did not reduce American history to a simplistic Manichean dualism, as Vernon Parrington tended to do in his history. Nor did Beard reduce American history to the happy story of liberal progress as Arthur Schlesinger, Sr. did in his work. Beard's history depicted a sophisticated dialectic between agrarian interests that represented Jeffersonian democracy and a commercial-minded elite who followed Hamilton's vision of an industrially developed country led by capitalist aristocracy. Beyond this broad dichotomy, Beard perceived a myriad of subgroups that often changed sides in accordance to their perceived (or misperceived) economic interests. The most important of these subgroups were the economic interests based on sectional difference. Thus American history, especially before the Civil War, could be seen as a struggle among western farmers, southern planters, and northeastern capitalists.

What made Beard's history so powerful was the dramatic structure he used to describe the "progress" of American history. In essence Beard's history was a kind of secular jeremiad. There was a strong teleological premise to his history, but it was a disturbed or spoiled teleology. The book that made Beard famous, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* (1913), was the story of how a handful of capitalistic speculators turn against the promise of Declaration of Independence of a democratic

republic and used the Constitutional convention to create a government designed to serve their limited economic interests. Beard described how this counter-revolution was overturned by Jefferson's victory in 1800. But instead of uninterrupted democratic progress, Beard explained in his work how dissention within the Jeffersonian (and later Jacksonian) ranks led to the recapture of the government by the capitalists.

For Beard, the Civil War was brought on by the overreaching by the southern planters to protect their slave property.<sup>22</sup> This overreaching tore the Democratic Party apart and separated the planter from the western farmer -- who Beard understood as natural agrarian allies against the northeastern capitalists -- and allowed the Republican Party to control the government for most of the rest of the nineteenth century. Although he called the Civil War a "second American revolution," Beard meant it in a negative sense. The war was nothing less than a tragic example of what happens when the forces of democracy and anti-capitalism lose sight of their basic principles and interests, and become divided in the face of their Hamiltonian enemies. According to Beard, the freeing of the slaves did not materially better the lives of the freedmen, and ultimately served as a ploy to divide the forces of democracy by subjugating the southern wing of the Democratic Party.<sup>23</sup> Even the Fourteenth Amendment was, according to Beard, nothing more than a tool devised by a railroad lawyer – Representative John A. Bingham, who was also a friend and colleague of the infamous Gilded Age corporate lawyer and Stalwart Republican, Roscoe Conkling – to extend the protection of the Bill of Rights to corporations and limit the power of state governments to regulate business.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Beard and Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization*, vol.11, 3-51.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. II, 52-121.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. II, 112-115.

Beard's history was a grand tragedy in which political complacency and short-sighted policy led to the frustration of the promise made by the Revolution of 1776 for a democratic government and an egalitarian society. He believed that the democratic forces were stronger in American history than the reactionary Hamiltonian forces. But Beard also argued that the Hamiltonians were, more often than not, better organized and had a clearer understanding of their economic interests, and thus they did a better job in using politics to further these interests. The forces of democracy, in contrast, were portrayed by Beard as faction-ridden, and consistently forgetful of their higher principles. His history really was a polemic that followed the form of the classic American sermon, the jeremiad. There was a prophetic warning in Beard's work, as well as simply a record of the past. He was warning the American people that they must not forget the democratic principles that lay at the foundation of the republic and that they must organize and always remain vigilant, because the enemies of democracy were constantly trying to twist the republic for their own advantage.

Beard developed a historiographical theory that justified this polemical approach. He explicitly rejected the Ranke's notion of "objectivity." In several essays and lectures, Beard insisted that a historian could not remove himself from society.<sup>25</sup> A historian's thoughts and methods were always shaped by contemporary concerns that – regardless of the intention of the historian – inevitability manifested themselves as a particular social or political outlook. Beard was convinced that one could discern an ideological bias in the particular sources and even the "facts" used in any work of history. This bias was,

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<sup>25</sup> Charles A. Beard, "Written History as an Act of Faith," *The American Historical Review* 39 (January, 1934), 219-231; Charles A. Beard, "That Noble Dream," *The American Historical Review* 41 (October, 1935), 74-87.

according to Beard, unavoidable, no matter how “objective” and “scientific” a historian tried to be.

Instead of trying to deny the existence of bias, or engaging in a quixotic quest to eliminate bias, Beard sought to harness it. That is, he sought to employ it in a rational manner for the sake of reform. This is not to say that he believed that history was infinitely malleable and that all “facts” were relative. Beard and the other progressive historians did not entirely reject Ranke. They did not argue for a return to a literary or mythical understanding of history. Like Ranke, the progressive historians understood history to be a professional and technical pursuit that took substantial training. In other words, they believed that historians were social scientists. And as social scientists, their research had to be systematic and honest. Good history, they believed, reflected at least an honest approximation of what actually happened.<sup>26</sup> What Beard and his fellow Progressives rejected were the claims by Ranke and those who followed him that they were objective and non-ideological. This was for Beard a foolish, if not dangerous, illusion.

Beard made the case against the Ranke's version of historical “objectivity” at a key time in the development of American social science. During the 1920s and 1930s the model of a reform-oriented social science, exemplified by the work of Beard and other early twentieth-century social thinkers such as John Dewey and Thorstein Veblen, was being challenged by a new generation of social scientists who believed that social science had to become more objective and scientific and less politically oriented. Sociologist William Ogburn went so far as to declare that social scientists should not aim to improve

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<sup>26</sup> Charles A. Beard, "The Problem of Historical Knowledge: An Answer to Relativism," *The American Historical Review* 44 (April, 1939), 571-572.

society, but merely try to understand it and help people adjust to social and economic change.<sup>27</sup> This ideology of “objective” social science, known by its detractors as scientism, became increasingly influential as government and business recognized its utility and patronized its practitioners. Beard was making the case for a more progressive approach that understood social science as a means to a specific goal -- a better and more just society. Historian Mark Smith has described this approach as “purposivism,” as oppose to the supposedly apolitical and non-goal oriented objectivity of scientism.<sup>28</sup> In general the “purposive” social scientist had a more holistic and qualitative approach to social research than the “objectivist” practitioners of scientism, who tended to be attracted toward quantitative methods and a reductionistic, often behaviorist, understanding of social interaction. Smith identifies sociologist Robert Lynd as an outstanding example of a purposive sociologist, and Lynd’s 1940 book, *Knowledge for What?*, as the most comprehensive critique of scientism.<sup>29</sup> Beard, like Lynd, insisted that research had to be guided by normative values, and for Beard these values had to be explicitly progressive.

At first Hofstadter found Beard’s argument for purpose-driven historical writing incredibly seductive. In a sense the progressive historians combined the nineteenth-century faith in the power of individual reason and science with twentieth-century recognition of the overwhelming power of the forces of modernity. Beard demonstrated through his work that economic forces often overwhelmed idealistic American notions of democracy and equality. But by doing so, Beard suggested that the intelligence of the

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<sup>27</sup> Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science*, (New York, 1991), 405-406, 442-445.

<sup>28</sup> Mark C. Smith, *Social Science in The Crucible: The American Debate Over Objectivity and Purpose, 1918-1941*, (Durham, 1994), 29-30.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 120-158.

historian could comprehend these forces and thereby begin a process in which reason – the expertise of individual reformer as well as the collective will of the people – could tame and direct these forces for the common good. Living in a world plagued by depression and a culture that appeared to be dominated by a vulgar commercial ethos, Hofstadter found the progressive paradigm irresistible.

Hofstadter's master's thesis reflected the progressive notion of purpose-driven history. It was, however, an imperfect example of genre. The thesis, titled "The Southeastern Cotton Tenant Under AAA, 1934-1935," was a very technical social scientific study of the agricultural programs of the first New Deal. It was present-minded and unlike anything that Hofstadter would write in the future. The study has been criticized for a lack of historical perspective.<sup>30</sup> Overall the thesis demonstrated that Hofstadter's interest in economics – despite his desire to emulate Beard – was limited. He had, after all, been a double history and philosophy major as an undergraduate. Ideas held a special fascination for him. While he certainly believed throughout the thirties, and indeed his entire graduate career, that economic forces primarily directed history, he was more interested in the ideas that arose as a response to and reflection of these forces, rather than the forces themselves. Fortunately for Hofstadter, he found at Columbia University an advisor who shared his interest in ideas while maintaining a fidelity to the progressive project – Merle Curti.

Merle Curti was a progressive historian. As an undergraduate at Harvard University, he was one of Frederick Jackson Turner's last students during the 1920s. Later, as a graduate student at Harvard, Curti worked with Arthur Schlesinger, Sr. Curti

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<sup>30</sup> Baker, *Radical Beginnings: Richard Hofstadter and the 1930s*, 110.

had a thoroughly Marxist outlook on history, and this impressed Hofstadter greatly.<sup>31</sup> More than his Marxism, though, it was the subject matter that Curti addressed that impressed Hofstadter so much. Curti was a historian of ideas. This is not to say that he understood intellectual history as the story of discrete ideas moving through and affecting history more or less intact, as in A.O. Lovejoy's conception of a History of Ideas.<sup>32</sup> Instead Curti understood ideas and culture as a complex product of other sociological forces, in particular economic forces. His Pulitzer Prize winning work, *The Growth of American Thought* (1943), was a survey of American cultural and intellectual history. The book followed the pattern established by Parrington by dividing forces in American culture into two distinct groups – one that advanced democracy and the values of the Enlightenment, and the other that impeded democracy, reinforced hierarchy, and revered tradition, especially religious tradition.

While Parrington greatly influenced Curti, *The Growth of American Thought* was a more sophisticated work of history than *Main Currents*. Where Parrington's work catalogued and listed the great and popular works of American letters, and then evaluated them on the basis of their positive or negative political and social influence, Curti gave a more all-encompassing description of American culture. Paying tribute to his early mentor, Turner, Curti described in the first chapter how the "American physical environment and new social environment" modified the Old World culture.<sup>33</sup> But he was

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>32</sup> For an example of a "History of Ideas," see Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea.*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1964). For a description of Lovejoy's understanding of a history of ideas, see Arthur O. Lovejoy, "Reflections on the History of Ideas," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 1 (January, 1940): 3-23. Also, for a discussion of Lovejoy and his opposition to the "relativism" promoted by Beard and other Progressive historians, see, Robert Allen Skotheim, *American Intellectual History*, (Princeton, 1966), 254-255. Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession*, 260-263.

<sup>33</sup> Merle Eugene Curti, *The Growth of American Thought*, 2d ed., (New York, 1943), 52.

also careful to avoid the reductionism that characterized the work of Turner and other progressive historians.

Curti argued that the origins of American culture and ideas were multi-faceted. There was a complex interaction between European trends of thought, such as the Enlightenment or Romanticism, and American cultural, social, political and economic needs and aspirations. Curti as a progressive was primarily concerned with the economic implications of American culture, but he understood that the relationship between culture and economics was complex and eluded simple cause-and-effect explanations. He also recognized that there was more to American culture than great works of literature. Much of *The Growth of American Thought* is concerned with the development of American education and the dissemination of knowledge, as well as popular forms of culture, including the culture of American minorities and especially African Americans.<sup>34</sup>

This is not to say that *The Growth of American Thought* was flawless. Curti had a great deal of difficulty dealing with the topic of religion in American culture. His progressivism classified religion as a retrograde force, a remnant from an aristocratic age that was generally used as a tool of dominance by the ruling classes. Yet, even from Curti's survey, it was apparent that religion inspired many reform movements throughout American history. Curti, however, tended to pass quickly over this paradoxical aspect of American religion. He also paid little attention to the reactionary potential of secular ideas, such as the way Darwinism was adopted as Social Darwinism as an ideological justification for the growth of industry and laissez-faire economics. Curti instead preferred to emphasize how Darwinism eroded traditional religious beliefs and

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 418-424.

practices.<sup>35</sup> Despite these oversights, *The Growth of American Thought* was a groundbreaking work that pointed a generation of American historians, including Hofstadter, toward a sophisticated American intellectual history that understood culture as a complex entity.

Curti also provided American intellectuals with a history of their own. That is to say, he traced for American liberal intellectuals the source of their own mentality. For Curti the dramatic turning point of American intellectual history was the creation of a distinctive American philosophy at the end of the nineteenth century -- pragmatism. In *The Growth of American Thought*, Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey were described as laying the intellectual foundation for a new secular humanism that refuted the doctrines of Social Darwinism, transcended the provincialism of Victorian moralism, and inspired a generation of progressive reformers and scholars.<sup>36</sup> This celebration of the-turn-of-the-century American progressive intellectuals was echoed by Morton White, when, in 1947, he described these thinkers as creators of the “distinctive liberal *Weltanschauung* of the twentieth-century.”<sup>37</sup> This became the common view of mid-century American liberal intellectuals. Even when intellectuals were critical of the thought of the early progressive era, they accepted the premise, so forcefully described by Curti, that progressive thinkers were their ideological forebears. White, for example, pointed out the limitations and contradictions in the work of the American pragmatic philosophers, but always maintained that their thought created the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 534.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 545-563.

<sup>37</sup> White, "The Revolt Against Formalism in American Social Thought," 131-152.

intellectual climate in which contemporary mid-century scholars, especially those working in the social sciences, conducted their work.<sup>38</sup>

On a personal level, Hofstadter found that Curti provided him with a bridge to the progressives, a way in which he could access the more dynamic aspects of early twentieth-century thought. As his lackluster master's thesis demonstrated, Hofstadter had up to this point in his graduate career felt constrained by the strict empiricism of social science.<sup>39</sup> Curti's approach to intellectual history allowed Hofstadter to combine his interest in ideas and philosophy with his political concerns. And Curti was particularly sympathetic to Hofstadter's politics. In 1938, when he first took a class with Curti, Hofstadter was a committed communist and found Curti's frank Marxism refreshing and reassuring. But Hofstadter found in Curti more than simply an ideological compatibility. Curti's work provided Hofstadter with an intellectual template that he would utilize throughout his career, even well after he had abandoned Marxism as a viable analytical tool.

Despite his commitment to the economic analysis favored by the progressive historians, Curti focused on the interaction and the complex relationship between ideas and society. He was also especially concerned with the role of the individual intellectual within society. It was an approach that allowed Curti to engage in informed and effective cultural criticism. One small book that illustrates this is *The Roots of American Loyalty* (1946). Although published in 1946, Curti began working on *The Roots of American Loyalty* in 1936, and the book certainly was on his mind as he advised Hofstadter.<sup>40</sup> The

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<sup>38</sup> Morton G. White, "Pragmatism and the Scope of Science," in *Paths of American Thought*, ed. Morton G. White and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. (Boston, 1963), 190-202.

<sup>39</sup> Baker, *Radical Beginnings: Richard Hofstadter and the 1930s*, 117.

<sup>40</sup> Merle Eugene Curti, *The Roots of American Loyalty*, (New York, 1946), ix.

study was an examination of the idea of “Americanism” and contrasted the rather narrow and provincial, if not outright bigoted, connotations that seemed to accompany this term with a more expansive, individualistic, and liberal notions of American patriotism that Curti believed have been present in American culture since Thomas Paine first called upon Americans to form a new nation. In short, *The Roots of American Loyalty* was a polemical work that placed patriotism in a broader historical context and urged Americans to reevaluate their strident wartime patriotism. This technique of mixing contemporary cultural criticism with historical analysis was a literary form that Hofstadter would emulate and perfect with *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (1963).

The more immediate effect of Curti’s influence was that Hofstadter began to work on a Marxist variety of intellectual history. Curti taught his students to examine specific intellectuals and contextualize their work within the dominant ideological framework of the era. One of the earliest examples of this was a paper that Hofstadter wrote for Curti’s seminar on the history of American thought, which dealt with the role of class conflict in Thomas Jefferson’s political philosophy. Hofstadter concluded that while Jefferson was well aware of the class conflict of his era, he did not address this conflict in the explicit terms that one finds in Marx, or even Number 10 of the *Federalist Papers*. Despite the radical tone of Jefferson’s rhetoric, Hofstadter observed that Jefferson was in practice only a “mild agrarian reformer,” who represented the moderate liberalism of a “magnanimous aristocrat.” In other words, Jefferson did not transcend his of class interests. On the contrary, he was a paradigmatic representative of the interests of the planter class. More significantly, however, Hofstadter realized that Jefferson’s agrarianism had little to do with the current social and economic situation in the United

States. The course of American history showed that Jefferson's hope that the southern landowning aristocracy would provide a bulwark against unrestrained capitalism was in vain. Furthermore, by the twentieth century the country was dominated by the two forces that Jefferson feared most, a manufacturing elite and an urban proletariat.<sup>41</sup> The truth was that Jefferson had very little to offer the modern liberal reformer.

This was a conclusion that was at odds with much of progressive history, which tended to lionize those figures who were regarded as proponents of democracy. Nevertheless, while Hofstadter was still in graduate school, he thought of his work as part of the progressive tradition. With the encouragement of his advisor, Hofstadter set out to build on the work of the progressive historians by applying a more sophisticated Marxist analysis to American history. His dissertation represented the culmination of this effort. It appears that Hofstadter got the idea for a study of how Darwinism was used as an ideological justification for the unrestrained capitalism of the late nineteenth century from his wife, but he was also influenced by Max Lerner's recently published book, *Ideas are Weapons* (1939).<sup>42</sup> In what would become his first book, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (1944), Hofstadter's dissertation examined how the early sociology of Herbert Spencer rationalized and promoted laissez-faire capitalism. The dissertation basically followed the progressive model and celebrated the rise of pragmatism as liberating American thought from Victorian formalism; but Hofstadter did not shy away from suggesting that the progressive categorization of intellectuals as either part of the forces of reaction or democracy and progress was inadequate. For example, in his description of Spencer's most ardent American proponent, William Graham Sumner,

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<sup>41</sup> Baker, *Radical Beginnings: Richard Hofstadter and the 1930s*, 118-122.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 165-166.

Hofstadter noted that although Sumner believed in a doctrinaire, almost predatory, form of laissez-faire capitalism, he was also an important proponent of the secularization of the American university and an early supporter of the modern concepts of academic freedom and value-free inquiry.<sup>43</sup> Even in this early work, one can discern Hofstadter's sense of the ironic, in this case the fact that Sumner, an ideologue for the plutocracy, was, when it came to the American academy, a progressive and, in some ways, quite radical.

The fact was that by 1941 Hofstadter increasingly questioned the validity of the progressive paradigm. His work on Jefferson led him to reevaluate the progressive concept of Jeffersonian agrarianism as the principal democratic force resisting the rise of the modern capitalistic economy. This revelation, in turn, led Hofstadter to his first explicit critique of a progressive historian. Vernon Louis Parrington lionized Jefferson more than any other progressive intellectual. Even Beard admitted that the most effective opponent of Hamilton's program to link the federal government to the interests of the new nation's commercial elite was ultimately representing the interests of his own land-owning class.<sup>44</sup> In the *Main Currents of American Thought*, in contrast, Parrington portrayed Jefferson as the very embodiment of Enlightenment rationalism and disinterested liberal humanitarianism.<sup>45</sup> "To all who profess faith in the democratic ideal," Parrington declared, "Jefferson is a perennial inspiration. A free soul, he loved freedom enough to deny it to none; an idealist, he believed that the welfare of the whole, and not the prosperity of any groups, is the single end of government."<sup>46</sup> In other words,

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<sup>43</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, rev. ed. ed., (Boston, 1955), 51-66.

<sup>44</sup> Beard, "Some Economic Origins of Jeffersonian Democracy," 282-298; Charles Austin Beard, *Economic Origins of Jeffersonian Democracy*, (New York, 1943).

<sup>45</sup> Vernon Louis Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought*, (New York, 1958), 342-356.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 355.

he was for Parrington nothing less than the paradigmatic example of the American progressive.

For Hofstadter, however, Jefferson, while certainly an admirable figure, was very much a man of his times and class, whose thought was more of a quaint remnant from a simpler time than a guiding set of principles for the modern age. In a 1941 article Hofstadter explained that Parrington – at least when it came to Jefferson – was more of a mythmaker than a serious historian.<sup>47</sup> Hofstadter noted that Parrington was a Westerner, whose “roots were firm in populist soil,” and therefore he gave voice the “long American heritage of grassroots radicalism.” It was natural that Parrington should celebrate Jefferson’s agrarianism as a source of American democracy. And Hofstadter did not disagree with Parrington’s assertion that the struggle between Jefferson and Hamilton was a struggle between a rural and democratic agrarianism of Jefferson (and later, Jackson) and the early manifestations of “classical Manchesterian capitalist thought” contained in Hamilton’s commercially oriented program.

Hofstadter did, however, question Parrington’s understanding of the sources of Jefferson’s ideology and the economic implications of these values. The assertion that Jefferson had been profoundly influenced by the French Physiocratic School, as opposed to the presumably more capitalist-oriented theories of Adam Smith, was the most glaring error made by Parrington. According to Hofstadter, Jefferson, although he was exposed to Physiocratic ideas during his trip to France in 1786 and became friends with one of the school’s major proponents, Dupont de Nemours, only “toyed” with the ideas of the group and never understood them to contradict Adam Smith. In fact, it was Franklin, not

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<sup>47</sup> Richard Hofstadter, "Parrington and the Jeffersonian Tradition," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 2 (October, 1941), 391-400.

Jefferson, who was a great admirer of the Physiocrats. By the time Jefferson was exposed to the school, the influence of the Physiocrats was on the wane. Furthermore, as Hofstadter noted, Jefferson was not hostile to Adam Smith. Jefferson actually endorsed *The Wealth of Nations* and agreed with Smith's critique of the Physiocrats.<sup>48</sup>

The root of Parrington's misunderstanding of Jefferson's view of Smith was a critical failure by Parrington to comprehend the nature and the political context of both Jeffersonian agrarianism and the French Physiocrats. Hofstadter admitted that Jefferson and the Physiocrats shared an admiration for agriculture, but he insisted that this represented more of a coincidental convergence of ideas rather than a significant Physiocratic influence upon Jefferson. The "high valuation upon agricultural life" was not "in itself a uniquely Physiocratic idea," and in America it "generally antedated Physiocratic influence." Hofstadter observed that the remarks quoted by Parrington as examples of Jefferson's agrarian beliefs came from *Notes on the State of Virginia*, written in 1781, "five years before his contact with the Physiocrats."<sup>49</sup>

However, more troubling than Parrington's chronological problems was his failure to place the Physiocrats in historical context. They were not the defenders of democracy. "The real goal of the Physiocratic creed," Hofstadter wrote, "was the desire to save the *ancient regime* by reforming its tax system."<sup>50</sup> The cornerstone of the Physiocratic tax reform was taxing the land of the tax-exempt aristocracy. By abolishing feudal privileges and obstacles to the free movement of agricultural goods within the kingdom – that is, the principle of *laissez faire* – the Physiocrats believed that the state could be made solvent. This directly contradicted Jeffersonian thought. "The American

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 396.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 393.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

agrarian tradition,” Hofstadter noted, “was based upon the idea that the capitalistic section of society was exploiting agriculture, chiefly through the medium of taxation.” Thus Parrington’s linking of Physiocracy and Jeffersonianism was historically inaccurate. Jeffersonianism was, as Parrington recognized, concerned with avoiding a centralized and powerful federal state. The Physiocrats, in contrast, sought to maintain and bolster the French monarchy -- the epitome of the centralized Old World tyranny.

One might excuse Parrington’s failure to understand French history; his failure to fully comprehend American history was less pardonable. Contrary to what Parrington maintained, Hofstadter believed that Jefferson was not antagonistic toward Adam Smith. Indeed, Jefferson and John Taylor – who Hofstadter described as the “most systematic philosopher of Jeffersonian democracy” – were in basic agreement with “the combination of governmental aloofness with reliance upon human self-interest” that would later characterize classical economic thought. Ironically, observed Hofstadter, it was Hamilton who rejected Adam Smith. While Hamilton made use of the “vast data” contained in *The Wealth of Nations*, he ignored its injunction that “industry if left to itself will naturally find its way to the most useful and profitable employment.” The difference between Jefferson and Hamilton was, more than anything else, a conflict between Hamilton’s economic nationalism and Jefferson’s laissez-faire capitalism.<sup>51</sup> According to Hofstadter, Parrington misunderstood the fundamental premises of Jefferson’s republican agrarianism. It was never anti-capitalist. That is, the “Jeffersonian and Jacksonian upsurges of 1800 and 1828” were not hostile “to the property relations of capitalism.”<sup>52</sup> Private property and laissez-faire were in fact essential parts of their philosophy.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 397-399.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 393.

Jefferson, and later Jackson, only opposed the use of government to further the particular capitalistic interests of a narrow segment of the population. Hofstadter insisted that their “agrarianism” was never a comprehensive theory designed to resist the capitalistic economy. Indeed, Jefferson and the Democratic-Republican Party that he helped found, “accepted fundamental economic premises which elsewhere served magnificently to rationalize the capitalistic order.” With an eye for ironic detail that anticipated his later work, Hofstadter noted that “visitors at Monticello in Jefferson’s later years were surprised to find there a marble bust of Hamilton,” and concluded that from the perspective of the twentieth century “they would not have been surprised: within the mansions of Jeffersonian democracy there were busts of Hamilton everywhere.”<sup>53</sup>

This was a sophisticated Marxist analysis of early American history, as well as a perceptive critique of Parrington. Hofstadter exposed the way in which Parrington romanticized Jefferson and ignored the founder’s own substantial class interests. In many ways, however, Parrington was an easy target. When the first volumes of *Main Currents* were published, he enjoyed enormous popularity. His book became a standard college text, and Parrington exerted a considerable influence on both American literary criticism and intellectual history. Indeed, he inspired a generation of scholars and critics to reevaluate, and even celebrate, the American intellectual tradition instead of turning to Europe to escape the perceived provincialism of their homeland. However, by 1940 Parrington’s reputation was beginning to tarnish. Many critics were noting Parrington’s apparent tin ear when it came to the modernist trends in American literature, and even Marxist critics questioned his realism. The most notable critic of Parrington was Lionel Trilling, whose essay, “Parrington and Reality” attacked the way Parrington’s aesthetic

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 400.

sensibilities and political judgment. But this was just one example. Hofstadter's friend, Alfred Kazin, also attacked Parrington. In *On Native Ground* – a book Kazin wrote while Hofstadter was writing his dissertation and the two men were commuting together from Brooklyn to the 42<sup>nd</sup> Street library to do their work – Kazin wrote that “it was unfortunate for Parrington (and equally unfortunate for a later generation that was to use him as an introduction to the study of American literature) that the political traditions which were so strong in him absorbed any tastes for esthetic values that he may have possessed.”<sup>54</sup>

Kazin's opinion of Parrington reflected the general impression that New York intellectuals had toward middlebrow culture. And the culture of the progressive era especially embodied the middlebrow in their minds. It was, after all, in that period that Van Wyck Brooks first proposed the middlebrow as a cultural plane in which the lowbrow and the highbrow could constructively mix.<sup>55</sup> For most New York intellectuals, Brooks's conception of the middlebrow was merely an excuse for the worse kind of cultural provincialism.<sup>56</sup> By 1941, Brooks seemed to be celebrating a mythical pre-industrial and pre-urban American past. This ideologically driven nostalgia was, in many ways, shared by the progressive historians. Parrington especially held a Jeffersonian agrarian vision of the country as an ideal that should be admired, even if impossible to emulate in the modern era. Beard also tended to depict the Jeffersonian conception of the United States as a path that was lamentably not taken. Neither Beard nor Parrington ever expressed a desire or, perhaps more importantly, the belief that it was even feasible to

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<sup>54</sup> Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose*, reprint ed. from 1995 ed., (New York, 1942), 158.

<sup>55</sup> Brooks, *America's Coming-of-Age*, 1-19.

<sup>56</sup> See, for example, Macdonald, "Kultur bolschewismus is Here," 442-452. and Tate et al., "On the 'Brooks-MacLeish Thesis'," 38-47.

return the country to a pre-industrial, pre-urban and agrarian society. But for the cosmopolitan and distinctly urban New York intellectuals, the progressive admiration of an idyllic agrarian past – one without large cities and presumably without any bohemian and immigrant enclaves – struck them as not only provincial but somewhat sinister as well.

Hofstadter was very much a product of the New York intellectual milieu and absorbed its values, both political and aesthetic. Also, his own background was certainly urban, and through his father, he was only a second-generation American. Furthermore, the concept of the middlebrow provided Hofstadter with a way of understanding the political and intellectual problems that he faced. It was not a coincidence that as Hofstadter became disillusioned with the Communist Party and moved further and further away from left-wing radicalism, he also reevaluated his earlier admiration of the progressive historians. The middlebrow was a concept that tied his political disillusionment with his intellectual dissatisfaction with progressive historiography.<sup>57</sup>

The agrarianism that the progressive historians appeared to venerate was for Hofstadter, at best, a quaint idea that had no relevance to his experience. As he was preparing to leave graduate school, he was receptive to the idea that there was something intellectually wrong with the progressive nostalgia for a Jeffersonian past. By the early 1940s critics such as Trilling and Hofstadter's close friend, Alfred Kazin, caused Hofstadter to reconsider the cultural values of the progressive historians and to question

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<sup>57</sup> For the most part, Hofstadter concentrated on historiographical manifestations of the middlebrow, that is, the flaws he perceived in the work of the Progressive historians. However, in one unusual article that he co-wrote with his second wife, Beatrice Hofstadter, in 1950, Hofstadter addressed the literary middlebrow that so bothered the critics that appeared in the *Partisan Review*. The article was about the popular American novelist of the early twentieth century, Winston Churchill. It analyzed the author and his work as a "symptom" the pathologies and illusions of progressive era liberals. See Richard Hofstadter and Beatrice Hofstadter, "Winston Churchill: A Study in the Popular Novel," *American Quarterly* 2 (Spring, 1950), 12-28.

their use of history for political purposes or, as Van Wyck Brooks described it, their creation of a “usable past.” Parrington was one of his first targets, but the next progressive historian that Hofstadter challenged, U.B. Phillips, was a far more egregious example of the antiquated and wrong-headed cultural values underlying their historical writing.

Today Phillips is more likely to be remembered as a racist rather than as a progressive historian. His depiction of American slavery as a benevolent institution will always be an embarrassment to American historians. However, it is sometimes forgotten that Phillips was not only widely respected as a pathbreaking historian in his day, his particular approach toward history was part of the progressive tradition. Phillips was above all an economic historian who understood American history as being characterized by economic conflict – conflict between the different economic systems of the North and the South and within the South, between small and large farmers and the owners of good and poor land.<sup>58</sup> Phillips’ methodology – his narrow focus on the account records of the largest plantations – was the target of Hofstadter’s critique.<sup>59</sup> Hofstadter cited census data proving that, at best, a narrow plurality of slaves lived on the large plantations that

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<sup>58</sup> In 1966, Eugene Genovese believed that much of Phillips’ work on the “political economy” of the South, and, in particular, what Genovese called “the economics of underdevelopment” had yet to be surpassed. Genovese, while declaring Phillips a racist, held his early work, such as *A History of Transportation in the Eastern Cotton Belt to 1860* (1906), in high regard. See, Eugene Genovese, “Ulrich Bonnell Phillips and His Critics,” in Phillips, *American Negro Slavery*, vii-xxi. A more recent biographer of Phillips suggests that Phillips was moving later in his life toward a “sociological” rather than a progressive inspired economic approach to history, but nevertheless sees progressive historiography, especially the work of Turner, as the major influence in Phillips’s understanding of history. See John Herbert Roper, *U.B. Phillips: A Southern Mind*, (Macon, GA, 1984), 67-118. A biographical essay written shortly after Phillips’s death in 1934, also attests to the profound influence that Turner had on Phillips. Like other Progressive historians, Phillips found in Turner an alternative to the rather stale narrow focus on political history that characterized late nineteenth century historiography. Turner’s work encouraged Phillips to discern the fundamental economic and geographical trends that determined history. See, Wood Gray, “Ulrich Bonnell Phillips,” in *The Marcus W. Jernegan Essays in American Historiography*, ed. William T. Hutchinson (Chicago, 1937), 354-373.

<sup>59</sup> Richard Hofstadter, “U.B. Phillips and The Plantation Legend,” *Journal of Negro History* 29 (April, 1944), 109-124.

Phillips utilized for his work. Furthermore, Hofstadter noted that Phillips concentrated on only the Old South and the Deep South, virtually ignoring the border states of Maryland, Missouri, Kentucky, and Tennessee, which contained 17.9 per cent of the American slaves according to the 1860 census. As for the small slaveholders – or as Phillips’s described them, “the plain people” – Hofstadter observed that 22.9 per cent of slaves “belonged to owners of less than ten” slaves.<sup>60</sup>

Hofstadter admitted that Phillips’s decision to concentrate on the large plantations was based in part on the fact that these records are widely available, while very few records from small farmers survived into the twentieth century. But this unfortunate difficulty only partially explained Phillips’s narrow focus. It appeared to Hofstadter that Phillips went out of his way to ignore sources that might have shed light on the condition of slaves on small farms. In particular, the writings of Frederick Law Olmstead provided a valuable glimpse into the economy of the small slaveholders. Indeed, Hofstadter went as far as to say that he believed that “a fuller more accurate knowledge of the late antebellum South can be obtained from the volumes of Olmsted than from Professor Phillips’ own writings.” The reason why Phillips ignored Olmsted, and many other possible sources on slavery, was clear to Hofstadter. Phillips was a southerner, and Olmstead’s writings contradicted his preconceived notion of southern history, which, Hofstadter noted, “always appeared in a haze of romance.” While he admired the “truly extraordinary mass of original material” used by Phillips, Hofstadter maintained that this material was “used in accordance with principles of selection governed by his personal bias.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 118-119.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 122.

Hofstadter's article was the first serious challenge to Phillips since W.E.B. Du Bois's efforts two decades earlier, and it started a dramatic reappraisal of southern slavery by historians.<sup>62</sup> But Hofstadter believed that his critique had wider-ranging implications. In the Phillips article, Hofstadter argued that as long as historians used the "same materials, and the same methods," as Phillips, they were likely to reach the same conclusions. What was needed was "new techniques" that employed the "viewpoint of modern cultural anthropology" and incorporated "a feeling for social psychology," which Hofstadter believed was especially important "in a study of a regime in which social status was so vital." If historians approached the topic with these tools and abandoned any preconceived notions about the South and slavery, then, Hofstadter declared, the possibilities for genuine insight and original research were "larger than ever."<sup>63</sup> And if new techniques and a fresh approach could revive the study of the ante-bellum South, then the same techniques could be used to challenge the "romanticism" of other progressive historians.

After the publication of the U. B. Phillips article, Charles Beard sent Hofstadter a note expressing satisfaction that someone had finally exposed Phillips's biases.<sup>64</sup> No one would accuse Beard of being a racist, but Beard's letter does beg the question of why he himself did not challenge Phillips. The fact was that despite Beard's reservations about

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<sup>62</sup> For the Du Bois –Phillips conflict see, John David Smith, "DuBois and Phillips -- Symbolic Antagonists of the Progressive Era," *The Centennial Review* 24 (Winter, 1980), 88-102. After his article on Phillips in 1944, Hofstadter did not examine the history of American slavery in any detail. Instead Kenneth Stampp would pursue the subject and initiate a period of revisionism that would change the way historians look at slavery, and most importantly, understood the lives of the slaves. See Kenneth M. Stampp, "The Historian and Southern Negro Slavery," *The American Historical Review* 57 (April, 1952), 613-624. and Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South*, (New York, 1956). When Hofstadter wrote the Phillips article, he was teaching at the University of Maryland and was good friends with Kenneth Stampp; see Baker, *Radical Beginnings: Richard Hofstadter and the 1930s*, 175-188.

<sup>63</sup> Hofstadter, "U.B. Phillips and The Plantation Legend," 124.

<sup>64</sup> Charles Beard to Richard Hofstadter, 8 May [no year given, probably 1944], Catalogued Correspondence, Richard Hofstadter Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

Phillips's characterization of slavery, Beard's understanding of American history was too similar to Phillips's history to mount an effective challenge. Beard insisted that the causes of the Civil War were primarily economic and that the war and its aftermath did little to improve the actual condition of African Americans in the South. He even dismissed the Fourteenth Amendment as being from its inception a tool devised by the capitalist class to protect their property, rather than a sincere attempt to constitutionally protect the rights of the freedmen.

By the mid forties Hofstadter had come to reject the progressive historiography completely. His connection with their radicalism had been broken. After Hofstadter completed the manuscript of his first book, he began to work on *The American Political Tradition*. During this effort, Hofstadter experienced another grave personal tragedy. His wife Felice was diagnosed with cancer in 1944 and died after a prolonged illness in July 1945. Alfred Kazin described in his memoir, *New York Jew*, how his friend started writing *The American Political Tradition* "on a pad" in Felice's "darkened sickroom."<sup>65</sup> It is a dramatic image. According to Hofstadter, though, he started the book in 1943, before Felice was diagnosed.<sup>66</sup> Yet, there can be no doubt that this tragedy only reinforced the tendency in Hofstadter to seek complexity in history where the progressives depicted a clear-cut clash of values and interests. In Hofstadter's mind, reality could not sustain such moral simplicity.

Ironically, Beard himself managed to reinforce Hofstadter's suspicion that the progressive historians were more interested in promoting a contemporary political agenda rather than honestly examining history. Beard was a staunch pacifist and isolationist. It

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<sup>65</sup> Kazin, *New York Jew*, 17.

<sup>66</sup> Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition, and the Men who Made It*, xxi.

was a position that he shared with the majority of American intellectuals (and Americans, in general) throughout the 1930s. However, most intellectuals changed their position after Pearl Harbor. Beard did not. To make matters worse, he defended his isolation from what, from the perspective of most New York intellectuals, was a bizarrely right-wing position. Beard attacked the Roosevelt administration for usurping the Constitution, the same Constitution he claimed in 1913 was merely a tool of the financial elite of the late eighteenth century. Just before he died in 1948, Beard published a critique of American foreign policy based on an outrageous conspiracy theory grounded more in speculation and innuendo than solid documentary evidence.<sup>67</sup> It was an unfortunate closing note for a great historian.

In 1950 Hofstadter criticized Beard's history of the Constitution.<sup>68</sup> The article, unlike Hofstadter's critique of Phillips, was not a detailed dissection of the statistical analysis found in *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*. Instead Hofstadter traced the political and cultural origins of Beard's conception of the Constitution. Above all, he found that Beard was influenced by the "thought of the Populist-Progressive-muckraking era" and that Beard was "not simply a scholar," but also "a publicist with an urgent interest in the intellectual and political milieu in which he lived."<sup>69</sup> Hofstadter also noted that Beard's interpretation of the Constitution changed in the late thirties as his doubts about the Roosevelt administration grew. To Hofstadter, this seemed to be proof that Beard's history was always tailored to the needs of the present. It also suggested to Hofstadter that the ideology and culture of the "Populist-

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<sup>67</sup> Charles Austin Beard, *President Roosevelt and the Coming of the War, 1941: A Study in Appearances and Realities*, (New Haven, 1948).

<sup>68</sup> Richard Hofstadter, "Beard and the Constitution," *American Quarterly* 2 (Autumn, 1950): 195-213.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*: 206-207.

Progressive” era needed to be examined in more detail and that the liberals of the 1950s ought to critically evaluate their intellectual predecessors.

## CHAPTER NINE

### **Expanding the Definition of a Radical**

By the time Richard Hofstadter wrote *The American Political Tradition* (1948), he had come to believe that the historiography of the progressive historians was fundamentally flawed. When he was first introduced in college to the work of the progressives Hofstadter found inspiring the way in which they tied their historiography to their contemporary political concerns. However, as the 1930s progressed, and Hofstadter, like many American intellectuals of his generation, experienced the frustrations of left-wing internecine conflict, as well as the crushing disappointment that came with the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, he developed a strong aversion to ideological thinking. His own personal experience had taught him that ideology often provided a skewed and misleading perception of reality.

Beyond his personal experience, Hofstadter observed that recent developments in social science provided him not only with a way to understand the problem of ideology in his time, but also a way to describe the effect of ideology in the past. Two thinkers in particular played a decisive role in shaping Hofstadter's understanding of ideology, Sigmund Freud and Karl Mannheim.<sup>1</sup> Of the two, the most important was the German sociologist, Karl Mannheim.<sup>2</sup> In *Ideology and Utopia* (1936), Mannheim gave a

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Hofstadter, "History and the Social Sciences," in *The Varieties of History*, ed. Fritz Stern (Cleveland, 1956), 359-370.

<sup>2</sup> Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, "Richard Hofstadter: A Progress," in *The Hofstadter Aegis*, ed. Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick (New York, 1974), 315-316; Jack Pole, "Richard Hofstadter," in *Clio's Favorites: Leading Historians of the United States, 1945-2000*, ed. Robert Allen Rutland (Columbia, Missouri, 2000), 76.

comprehensive theory of ideology. His theory began with a refined definition of ideology. In contrast to the Marxist conception of ideology as simply the cultural justification created by the ruling class to support its domination, Mannheim developed a non-evaluative description of ideology as a totalizing mode of thought that was socially shared. At times, an ideology may be a perfectly reasonable mode of thought that served a society and its members fairly well. But ideology could also distort perceptions of reality in such a way as to hinder the ability of a society to function. In Mannheim's schema, ideology was not inherently good or bad, but rather a descriptive term for a general system of thought.

The relationship between Mannheim's concept of ideology and Hofstadter's "climate of opinion" is quite apparent. Both ideas described a society-wide mode of thought, and both could act to distort perceptions of reality. Mannheim argued that "antiquated and inapplicable norms, modes of thought, and theories are likely to degenerate into ideologies whose function is to conceal the actual meaning of conduct rather than reveal it."<sup>3</sup> The use of the word "degenerate" is important. Mannheim used the word "degenerate" to describe the phenomenon that the Marxists call ideology. Like Marx, Mannheim identified ideology as a product of the ruling or dominant class or group. However, he did not ascribe to that class any kind of deliberate action. The mode of thought -- the "ideology" -- simply "degenerates" and leaves society with an inadequate means by which to comprehend the world. The difference between Marx and Mannheim is not so much that Marx believed that ideology is a conscious tool of the ruling class, while Mannheim believed that the ruling class was innocent of any guile.

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<sup>3</sup> Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, (New York, 1949), 85.

Rather, Marx was not particularly interested in whether the ruling class consciously perceived what it was doing or not. The inner psychological workings of society were of little concern to Marx compared to the economic forces that he believed ultimately determined the psychological attitudes and social dispositions of a society. In contrast, the psychological inner workings of society and how an individual's psychological make-up affects that individual's interaction with society were of supreme importance to Mannheim.

A society's inner psychological workings were also of supreme importance to Hofstadter. Once he had abandoned the economic determinism that characterized his early work and began to explore intellectual history, Hofstadter was epistemologically drawn toward a mode of historical explanation that focused on the psychological and cultural, as opposed to the material. The fact that Hofstadter's personal experiences also suggested that the incongruity between perception and reality was a significant factor in the way people approached politics only reinforced his inclination to look toward social psychology for guidance. And Mannheim provided Hofstadter with not only a way to understand how outmoded modes of thought could create social difficulties, but also a way to understand how new modes of thought could lead to a gap between understanding and reality. "A state of mind," Mannheim explained, "is utopian when it is incongruous with the state of reality in which it occurs."<sup>4</sup> Thus Mannheim gave Hofstadter a binary concept -- ideology and utopia -- to describe the thought process of groups, sometimes whole societies, when they created self-deceptive climates of opinion.

Mannheim's attitude toward utopia and ideology is best described as ambivalent. He recognized that "the utopias of today may become the realities of tomorrow." That is

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 173.

to say, Mannheim did not completely reject Marx. He believed, like Marx, that the label of utopia is applied by the dominant group whose members are representative of “an epoch that has already passed,” and that “the ascendant group is in conflict with things as they are, is the [group] that determines what is regarded as ideological.”<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Mannheim believed that if utopian thinking disappeared, then a “static state of affairs” would arise and humanity “would lose [its] own will to shape history and therewith [its] ability to understand it.”<sup>6</sup> And yet his entire project was to enable the intellectual to see beyond ideology and utopia and discern reality -- things as they actually exist -- more clearly. It seems that Mannheim thought that ideology and utopia were inevitable products of history that could provide security and hope or misperceptions and social miscalculations, if not outright chaos and breakdown. It was precisely this kind of paradoxical understanding of social perceptions that appealed to Hofstadter.

The other great influence on Hofstadter -- Freud -- came to the historian indirectly from the work of many others. Mannheim provided an integration of Marx and Freud, but there were many other Freudian-inclined thinkers who influenced Hofstadter. For example, he cited Columbia University sociologist Harold Lasswell as an important source for Freudian concepts.<sup>7</sup> Before and after the war, Lasswell studied the psychological factors that influenced political behavior and leadership styles.<sup>8</sup> Also, Hofstadter’s friend, David Riesman, explored how certain societies tended to produce certain “character-types.”<sup>9</sup> And Hofstadter’s colleague at Columbia, sociologist Robert

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 236.

<sup>7</sup> Hofstadter, "History and the Social Sciences," 362.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Harold Dwight Lasswell, *Psychopathology and Politics*, (Chicago, Ill., 1930); Harold Dwight Lasswell, *The Analysis of Political Behavior: An Empirical Approach*, (London, 1948); Harold Dwight Lasswell, *Power and Personality*, (New York, 1948).

<sup>9</sup> Hofstadter, "History and the Social Sciences," 362.

K. Merton, employed Freudian concepts and followed a line of inquiry very similar to Mannheim.<sup>10</sup>

However, the most important source of Freudian concepts utilized by Hofstadter was the so-called Frankfurt School of sociology. This was a group of German émigré sociologists who applied Freudianism to the problem of political extremism.<sup>11</sup> In particular, Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer provided Hofstadter with a set of concepts that distinguished Hofstadter's work throughout the 1950s. During the thirties, several American academics and prominent intellectuals, with the aid of some well financed private organizations, such as the Rockefeller Foundation, were concerned about the safety of the left-wing and mainly Jewish intellectuals in Nazi Germany and worked to bring as many endangered intellectuals to the United States. The Frankfurt School benefited from this effort. Originally offered a place at Columbia University, the school affiliated with the University of California for the duration of the war. While in California, Horkheimer became a director of the Studies in Prejudice project, which was funded by the American Jewish Committee, and Adorno became the lead researcher of one of the study's sub-projects, which published its findings as *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Elkins and McKittrick, "Richard Hofstadter: A Progress," 318-319.

<sup>11</sup> The Frankfurt School of German social thought was centered on the Institute of Social Research, established in 1923 and affiliated with the University of Frankfurt. The term "Frankfurt School" was not used until after the institute was forced to flee Germany in 1933. After the war, the institute reestablished itself in Germany in 1950. Horkheimer and Adorno were the institute's leading members. Mannheim had been associated with the institute for a time during the 1920s, but during the 1930s he was not in any formal way connected to the Frankfurt School. Tom Bottomore, *The Frankfurt School*, (London, 1984), 11-14. Also see, Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950*, (Boston, 1973). Jay's book is still considered the definitive history of the institute.

<sup>12</sup> Anthony Heilbut, *Exiled in Paradise: German Refugee Artists and Intellectuals in America*, (New York, 1983), 91-94.

Hofstadter found *The Authoritarian Personality* an invaluable tool. The study described a personality type that was inclined to fascistic thinking.<sup>13</sup> But the study did not just develop a method that could identify potential fascists; it tried to explain the specific psychological and social factors that created the fascist personality type in the individual. In short, Adorno and his co-researchers discovered that a loss of social status, or simply a fear that social status will be lost, often caused an individual to adopt a fascistic or an “authoritarian” personality, and if given an opportunity to join a group that reinforced these feelings, the individual would probably express himself or herself through fascist-like political action. Hofstadter applied this concept of “status-anxiety” to American history to explain what he saw as extreme and irrational political movements and moments of general public fear and hysteria.

Adorno’s study was designed to discover the latent fascist or right-wing tendencies in American society. The underlying assumption of the study was that American society was as prone, if not more so, to fascist politics as any European society, including Germany. Yet Hofstadter’s first major application of “status anxiety” and other aspects of Adorno’s work was an examination of the American left-wing. In his book, *The Age of Reform* (1955), Hofstadter described the ideological thinking of the American populists of the 1890s and the utopian thinking of the progressive movement of the early twentieth century. His remarkably concise book begins with the basic theoretical assumption established by *The American Political Tradition* (1948) -- that is, Americans

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<sup>13</sup> The authors of *The Authoritarian Personality* measured ideological attitudes through questionnaires and interviews. They quantified an individual’s attitude on a scale; for example anti-Semitism was measured by the “A-S” scale, the higher the score, the stronger the anti-Semitic feelings, prejudices and ideology in the subject. These scores were then combined to formulate the “F” score, which measured the individual’s “anti-democratic” or “fascistic” potential. See for explanation of “F” scale, Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality*, 222-279.

had a fundamentally capitalist and bourgeois system of values and, on the whole, did not radically challenge the basic structure of society. To this basic presupposition, Hofstadter added the idea of status anxiety. He thus described the populists and the progressives as essentially middleclass Americans who, in the case of the populists, had lost status, and in the case of the progressives, feared a potential loss of status, and thereby adopted a form of political extremism.

The populists received especially bad treatment from Hofstadter. He described them as fundamentally bourgeois people, “whose politics were petty-capitalist rather than traditionalist.” They were, in Hofstadter’s view, agrarian hypocrites, who used wasteful agricultural methods in order to make the quickest profits. Their socialism was confined to getting the government to cover added costs, and not to create any genuine form of economic collectivism. Furthermore, the American farmer was pathologically isolated and inclined toward an unrealistic -- that is an ideological -- conception of individualism. Despite their ostensibly left-wing views, it seemed that the populists engaged in the sort of thinking and politics that in the twentieth century has been most closely associated with fascism.<sup>14</sup> Much like the extreme right-wing movements of Hofstadter’s time, the People’s Party that represented the populists was guided by a wild conspiracy theory that labeled any outsider as a potential enemy and summoned apocalyptic imagery. “A vast conspiracy against mankind has been organized on two continents,” wrote Hofstadter quoting the Populist leader, Ignatius Donnelly, “and it is rapidly taking possession of the world. If not met and overthrown at once it forebodes

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<sup>14</sup> Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: from Bryan to F.D.R.*, 44-46.

terrible social convulsions, the destruction of civilization or the establishment of absolute despotism.”<sup>15</sup>

Hofstadter insisted that he was not trying to establish that “the Populists and Progressive movements were foolishly destructive but that they had, like so many things in life, an ambivalent character.”<sup>16</sup> Ambiguity was certainly one of the hallmarks of Hofstadter’s historical writings, but his disapproval toward the populists, and to a lesser extent the progressives, who he accused of “utopian” thinking, was anything but ambivalent. It was far more reminiscent of the sort of denunciation of middlebrow culture that had by then become a staple of the thinking of most New York intellectuals. Just as Macdonald and Greenberg had done in the late 1930s, Hofstadter was conflating the political and the cultural. He saw the populists and the progressives as ethnocentric bigots -- which often were they -- and assumed that their political views flowed naturally from their cultural prejudices -- which was an assumption that was not clearly evident.

Most of the reviews of *The Age of Reform* were favorable. Arthur Ekirch, Jr., applauded Hofstadter for his exposure of the “agrarian myth,” which was so “fondly recreated in the folklore of Populism,” and the status anxiety that motivated the progressives.<sup>17</sup> George Mowry, who had recently written a debunking history of California progressives, was more direct when he declared “this book simply demands consideration for the Pulitzer Prize.”<sup>18</sup> And Daniel Boorstin thanked Hofstadter for his “epoch-making reinterpretation of the Populist and Progressive era” and for “helping us

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>17</sup> Arthur A. Ekirch, Jr., “The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.,” *The Journal of Southern History* 22 (May, 1956), 255-256.

<sup>18</sup> George Mowry, “The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 42 (March, 1956), 768-769. Also see, George Edwin Mowry, *The California Progressives*, (Berkeley, 1951).

to identify and break up the stereotypes through which we have been seeing the past.”<sup>19</sup>

The Pulitzer committee agreed with Mowry and *The Age of Reform* won the Pulitzer Prize for History in 1956.

Not everyone, however, thought the book deserved the prize. One reviewer who did not care for Hofstadter’s book was William Appleman Williams, who described it as “a volume which is not history and which does not match the quality” of Hofstadter’s previous work. Williams, whose 1959 book, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, would become a harbinger of the revived radicalism of the New Left, accused Hofstadter of writing a book that was designed to appeal to the “New Liberalism” that seemed committed to defending, what Williams called, “The Existing Institution.” Hofstadter’s book was seen by Williams as another manifestation of the anti-radicalism that appeared to be emanating from much of the academic establishment and so-called liberal intellectuals at that time. He particularly objected to the way in which Hofstadter dismissed the relationship between economic power and status, and instead employed “the ideas, concepts and hypotheses of social psychology as though they were cookie patterns.” But this was not just an example of a flawed analytical technique. Williams believed there was a more sinister motive behind Hofstadter’s use of social science. “For History as a reasoned facsimile of the past has always been the intellectual’s ideal,” Williams declared, “whereas implicit in Hofstadter’s methodology is the view of History as a body of information to be manipulated.”<sup>20</sup>

By the “New Liberalism,” Williams was referring to the centrist liberalism that was described by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., in *The Vital Center* and, by 1956, appeared

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<sup>19</sup> Daniel J. Boorstin, “New View of American Reform,” *Commentary* 21 (1956), 396-398.

<sup>20</sup> William Appleman Williams, “The Age of Re-Forming History,” *The Nation* 182 (1956), 552-554.

to be the dominant ideology of the Democratic Party. The association of this position with Hofstadter was fair. The anti-radicalism that Hofstadter had developed during the 1940s certainly influenced his work in the following decade. Also, although Hofstadter may not have been as closely associated with the Democratic Party as Schlesinger, by the 1950s he was becoming politically active again. The irony, though, was that Hofstadter's renewed commitment to some form of political action was spurred not by the extremism of the left, but rather the onset of McCarthyism. And it was the search for the historical roots of McCarthyism that led Hofstadter to employ a social psychological approach to history.

During the 1940s, Hofstadter did not engage in any direct political commentary. While his work reflected what can be described as an anti-radical modernist sensibility, Hofstadter was not a participant in the fierce discourse over the legacy of Stalinism and the future role of the radical left in the liberal coalition. However, the rise of McCarthyism roused Hofstadter to action. There is no evidence that Hofstadter himself was ever the target of any investigations. Although he had been a member of the Communist Party, Hofstadter's involvement was always limited, and the time he was an actual card-carrying member was less than a year. However, even though he was not a target, Hofstadter felt McCarthy, and the sentiment the senator from Wisconsin represented, was a threat to academia. Many professors were former radicals and a significant number of them were called to publicly testify on their former activities. Although as a percentage of the total number of college professors the number who permanently lost their jobs was small, there was a justified sense of fear within the academy. Thus one of the first manifestations of Hofstadter's political involvement was

his participation in Columbia University's American Academic Freedom Project, which resulted in the publication of a history of academic freedom written by Hofstadter, titled *The Development of Academic Freedom in the United States* (1955).<sup>21</sup>

Hofstadter was always attuned to his role as an intellectual and participated in political action as a Columbia University college professor and a historian. He believed that the academy had to be a space in which intellectual inquiry could be conducted without any -- as Mannheim would put it -- ideological or utopian interference. Given the fact that Hofstadter regarded his role as an intellectual as threatened by right-wing extremism, one might assume that he would reevaluate his anti-radical position. This did not happen. Instead Hofstadter expanded his definition of radicalism to include the extremism of the right as well as the left. Rhetorically, this echoed Schlesinger's circle diagram of political ideology, and it was during the 1950s that "radical" came to be used in the United States to describe any form of political extremism, whether from the right or left. However, by broadening the definition of radicalism, Hofstadter was trying not just to change the way politics was conceptualized, but also change the way it was conducted and to limit the American political sphere to only rational discourse, or at least, to what Hofstadter understood as rational discourse.

In March 1954 Hofstadter participated in a university seminar that was devoted to examining the resurgent American right.<sup>22</sup> There he presented a paper in which he described this resurgent political force as a "pseudo-conservative revolt." The term came from *The Authoritarian Personality*, where it was used to describe a particular kind of American conservative who defined his "conservatism" by hostility to liberal Democrats

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<sup>21</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The Development of Academic Freedom in the United States*, (New York, 1955).

<sup>22</sup> Columbia University Seminar on the State, March 24, 1954, Box 24, Richard Hofstadter Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

and minorities, rather than by affirming specific American traditions and political norms.<sup>23</sup> Hofstadter employed the term in a similar fashion but stressed that the pseudo-conservative was willing to employ radical methods -- especially violence -- to combat those groups and forces that he viewed as “un-American,” even if it meant the destruction of the very traditions that the pseudo-conservative claimed to be protecting.<sup>24</sup> This paper was published, along with several other papers from the same series of Columbia University seminars on the state, in a book edited by Daniel Bell, *The New American Right* (1955).<sup>25</sup>

Hofstadter’s essay, “The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt,” was one of the earliest examples of how he utilized the Adorno study to analyze American society. Like Adorno, Hofstadter understood the pseudo-conservative phenomenon as a psychological pathology that reflected an inability to engage in any interpersonal relationships other than those that are strictly authoritarian or submissive.<sup>26</sup> However, Hofstadter also applied to the concept of the “pseudo-conservative” what he believed were the unique characteristics of American society and history. Unlike Europe, Hofstadter asserted, class divisions in the United States were fluid and often unclear. At the same time, Americans were divided into discrete ethnic and religious groups that were often in conflict with each other and that cut across social-economic boundaries. Finally, he

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<sup>23</sup> Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality*, 49-50.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Hofstadter, "The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt (1955)," in *The Radical Right*, ed. Daniel Bell (New Brunswick, NJ, 2002), 75-95.

<sup>25</sup> Daniel Bell, ed., *The Radical Right*, 3d ed., (New Brunswick, NJ, 2002). This book was originally published under the title *The New American Right* in 1955. In 1963, when the book came out in a new edition, the title *The Radical Right* was used. The term “Radical Right” came from an essay that appeared in the original edition by Seymour Martin Lipset, “The Sources of the Radical Right,” which was one of the earliest application of the term “radical” to the right. The edition cited here contains all the versions of all the essays as that appeared in each edition of the book, as well as the prefaces and introductions from each edition. It also contains an introduction by David Plotke and an afterward by Daniel Bell, both written in 2001.

<sup>26</sup> Hofstadter, "The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt (1955)," 89.

noted, Americans were unified by some version of an ideology of individualism that promoted the myth of self-reliance and upward mobility. All of this, according to Hofstadter, created a society that was held together far more loosely than any European society, and the individual American was far more susceptible to feelings of dislocation and anomie.

Surprisingly, Hofstadter did not see these American differences from European norms as entirely negative. He disagreed with the assumption of the Adorno study that the United States was as susceptible to a fascist political movement as European countries were. The lack of a firm class structure and the atomizing qualities of American society, as well as its ideology of individualism, made it difficult to create and, more importantly, sustain the effective and cohesive organization needed for a successful fascist movement.<sup>27</sup> This did not mean, however, that the pseudo-conservative revolt was nothing more than a minor nuisance. Quite the contrary, the pseudo-conservative revolt, while not leading to a fascist takeover, nevertheless distracted the nation's political attention and hindered government's ability to deal rationally with contemporary problems. Hofstadter was referring to the disruptions cause by McCarthyism and, more generally, to the distractions and mischief -- in particular, the serious consideration of what Hofstadter regarded as spurious constitutional amendments -- caused by the Republican controlled Senate. In short, Hofstadter believed that the primary problem with "pseudo-conservatism" was that it was irrational and had a tendency to drive lucid discourse out of the political sphere.

There was no obvious solution to the problem of the pseudo-conservative revolt. Hofstadter attempted to understand the peculiar aspects of American history that made

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 82-83,95.

this country susceptible to this kind of disruption. The 1920s, for example, saw the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and anti-immigrant and anti-Semitic sentiment and seemed to Hofstadter to be another period of pseudo-conservative revolt. The odd thing about the twenties and the fifties was that they were relatively prosperous periods. In accordance with European norms, Hofstadter believed, times of depression were the periods most likely to see a rise of conservative or fascist sympathies. The United States, in contrast, appeared to reverse this pattern. To explain this apparent abnormality, the historian divided American politics into two categories. One was “*interest*” politics, which according to Hofstadter’s conceptualization, was political activity that was motivated by economic interest. The 1930s was the heyday for interest politics, and the political platforms of the day, while not necessarily realistic, were always programmatic and designed to solve or alleviate a particular economic problem. In contrast “*status*” politics was the politics of relatively prosperous eras, when anxiety about perceived losses or potential losses of social status was expressed politically. Hofstadter was convinced that status politics could not be easily resolved. Unlike interest politics, in which the mitigation of the particular economic problem led to a resolution of a particular political conflict, status politics consisted of one group asserting its superior “loyalty,” “Americanness,” or even simply its superior morality over other groups. There was no way, Hofstadter observed, to reassure and calm anxiety, aside from perhaps designating one group to be a scapegoat, which was an unacceptable solution.<sup>28</sup>

To make matters worse, Hofstadter argued, the peculiar circumstances of the mid-twentieth century seemed to make growth of interest politics more likely. One difficulty was that the modern economy operated very differently than it did in the past. Hofstadter

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 84-87.

was convinced that the American economy had reached something akin to a final or penultimate stage of capitalism. The past fifty years suggests that Hofstadter underestimated the future rate of economic and technological change. Nevertheless, his belief that the post-war post-New Deal economy had reached kind of plateau or even a kind of stasis was a common assumption made by Cold War liberals. The important fact in Hofstadter's mind was that the economy was now bureaucratically controlled and increasingly rationally directed. This meant a more stable economy, but it also meant an end to dramatic increases in social and economic status. The "built-in status elevator" that had alleviated the status problems caused by the arrival of new immigrants no longer operated, "or at least no longer operated in the same way."<sup>29</sup>

Another problem was that the new mass media, radio, and most recently television, "have brought politics closer to the people than ever before and made politics a form of entertainment in which the spectators feel themselves involved." Because of this, Hofstadter argued, Americans were more inclined to relate to politics on an emotional level than ever before, and thereby encourage the growth of status-type politics as people projected their personal problems into the political sphere.<sup>30</sup> This is an interesting supposition, and in many ways history has proved Hofstadter correct. However, Hofstadter also displayed anxiety about the prospects of a mass society. Again, one can discern the echo of Greenberg's polemic against kitsch in Hofstadter's ominous warning that "mass communications have aroused the mass man."<sup>31</sup>

There were also more concrete and less controversial factors that Hofstadter believed would encourage the growth of status politics in the immediate future. The fact

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," 34-49.

that a more or less liberal Democratic coalition had controlled the American government for an unprecedented two decades, made those who felt they were out of power more resentful and, perhaps, more desperate. The election of a Republican as president might alleviate some of this pressure, but Hofstadter suspected that the habit of resentment had become too entrenched and that there were already signs that the kind of vindictive feelings directed against Roosevelt and Truman were being directed against Eisenhower. Hofstadter also observed that the United States had experienced over the past two decades a constant state of crisis. First came the Depression, then the Second World War, and most recently, the Cold War, which in 1954 showed no signs of ending anytime soon.

All of this created tension and anxiety that Hofstadter was convinced would be expressed in the form of status politics. Although he did not believe that a fascist takeover was imminent, Hofstadter was concerned that effective government would be hindered and that at some point in the future this could lead to a more serious breakdown in American democratic procedures than what had recently occurred. "In a populist culture like ours," Hofstadter explained, "which seems to lack a responsible elite with political and moral autonomy, and in which it is possible to exploit the wildest currents of public sentiment for private purposes, it is at least conceivable that a highly organized, vocal, active and well-financed minority could create a political climate in which the rational pursuit of our well-being and safety would become impossible."<sup>32</sup>

Hofstadter's response to the crisis caused by McCarthyism is an extraordinary application of the modernist and anti-radical trends that have been discussed in the preceding pages. Any radical interpretation of McCarthyism from the left was rejected

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<sup>32</sup> Hofstadter, "The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt (1955)," 95.

from the beginning. Indeed, even what might be considered a traditional liberal understanding of McCarthyism and how to combat it -- for example a recognition that the New Deal coalition has faltered in the past years and that a revived campaign for reform might reenergize the masses in the Democrats' favor -- is ignored. Instead, Hofstadter argued that what the country needed was a "responsible elite with political and moral authority." There is an undeniable elitism running through his analysis. Politics, according to Hofstadter, was too difficult and fragile a pursuit to leave to the vagaries of the masses.

In fairness to Richard Hofstadter, he never explicitly suggested that some kind of elite should be formally empowered, and he certainly never argued that there should be any restrictions on democratic politics. In fact, Hofstadter was extraordinarily skeptical of the government's ability to in any way to restrict the ability of the radical right formally -- or for that matter, the radical left -- to function. But he did have something that resembled a plan. Hofstadter thought that the way to combat irrationality was to employ rationality. The social and psychological factors that led to the formations of the radical right had to be exposed and explained. And although there was no "responsible elite" in the country, that did not mean that leaders could not act responsibly. To achieve the first part of his plan, Hofstadter began to investigate the origins of "interest" politics historically and the development of the particular emotional style that dominated much of American political history. The first product of this investigation was *The Age of Reform* (1955), which suggested to Hofstadter that the "pseudo-conservative revolt" was a regular occurrence in American history, but not always "conservative." In the populists,

he found that “status” politics could be promoted in the guise of left-wing programmatic interest-like politics.

For the second part of his plan to combat the irrational impulses in American politics, Hofstadter believed as an intellectual (especially one who was a professor at Columbia University), he had a responsibility to provide guidance and information to American leaders, and more importantly, he had to do his best to try to modify the “climate of opinion” in a way favorable to rational political discourse. In practice this meant that Hofstadter made himself available to various groups and organizations that were concerned with promoting a positive civic order. One of these groups was the Fund for the Republic, which was an organization that was created to combat McCarthyism, and after the senator’s fall, other McCarthy-like movements, which included organizations and groups that actively opposed civil rights for African Americans. The Fund was founded in 1952 with an initial grant of \$200,000 from the Ford Foundation. The membership of the fund read like a who’s who of leading citizens. Many prominent business executives, college presidents, intellectuals, and a few politicians even, joined the Fund for the Republic. It was key part of what could be described as the liberal establishment.<sup>33</sup>

Hofstadter’s first involvement with the Fund for the Republic occurred in 1953 when he participated in a group that was assigned by the Fund to develop a plan for a project that would study the ideology of “business and agrarian interest groups.”<sup>34</sup> Over

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<sup>33</sup> For the founding and early history of the Fund for the Republic, see Thomas C. Reeves, *Freedom and the Foundation: The Fund for the Republic in the Era of McCarthyism*, (New York, 1969), 3-60; Frank K. Kelly, *Court of Reason: Robert Hutchins and the Fund for the Republic*, (New York, 1981), 1-62. Both books are very positive accounts of the Fund. Reeves is especially celebratory. Kelly gives the more substantial history.

<sup>34</sup> Richard Hofstadter et al., "Memorandum to the Twentieth Century Fund: Suggestion for a Study of Business Ideologies, March 30, 1953," (1953), Box 23, Richard Hofstadter Papers, Butler Library,

the next several years, Hofstadter would work for the fund on various projects and assignments. The Fund for the Republic, in turn, seemed to be impressed with Hofstadter's work and distributed his essay, "The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt," to some 25,000 prominent American community leaders and groups.<sup>35</sup> In December 1957, Hallock Hoffman asked Hofstadter to prepare a memorandum for the fund about the threat that right-wing extremist groups posed to the country.<sup>36</sup> Over the next year Hofstadter prepared a paper that elaborated the themes that he addressed in *The Age of Reform* and "The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt." The result of the historian's efforts was a report that explicitly described how he understood the real-world application of his model of American political extremism.

The memorandum's title, "The Contemporary Extreme Right-Wing in the United States," suggests that Hofstadter was a bit out of his element. He was a historian who was used to examining issues, events, and movements with the luxury of hindsight. When he wrote about the populists and their strange ideas about monetary policy, Hofstadter was able to do so with the knowledge that their movement ultimately failed, in large part, because their demands for an inflationary policy favored too narrow a segment of the population -- the farmer -- while it did nothing for the growing population of industrial workers and was a threat to most of the middle class. As a historian, he also had the benefit of some sixty years of refinement of economic theory. In 1955, it seemed

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Columbia University. The group included, Franz Newman and David Truman, both Columbia University professors, Emile Despres, a William College professor, H.H. Wilson, a Princeton University Professor, and J.K. Galbraith, a Harvard economist.

<sup>35</sup> Folder 17 -- Distribution Project: Hofstadter, Richard, "The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt," 1954-1968, The Fund for the Republic Archives, Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University.

<sup>36</sup> Hallock Hoffman to Richard Hofstadter, December 9, 1957, Box 24 -- Richard Hofstadter Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University. At the time, Hoffman was the administrator of the fund's project "on the exploration of political parties, pressure groups, and professional associations." Kelly, *Court of Reason: Robert Hutchins and the Fund for the Republic*, 133.

as though the currency issue had been settled once and for all. The dollar was stable and due to the Bretton Woods Agreement it provided the basis for most of the world's currency. This stability was a relatively recent development, with the national monetary policy finally settled during the 1930s and the international system was only established in 1944. Furthermore, in the early 1970s, the system would collapse. But for the moment -- the 1955 -- the problem had been solved, and Hofstadter was able to judge with a fair degree of certainty what exactly was wrong with the populists' program.

Hofstadter also knew that from a cultural perspective the populists did not represent the future. The United States was becoming more urban and less Anglo-Saxon every year, and by 1955 was becoming a land of suburban communities where the descendants of the eastern and southern European immigrants of the 1890s were often the majority of the populations. The nature of their work force historians to judge the past and Hofstadter did this well. However, when forced to make a judgment on the present, his discursive style failed him and his judgments often seemed hasty, even flippant, and, in the light of hindsight, often wrong. Nevertheless, the memorandum is a fascinating document that tells us what exactly Hofstadter thought should be actually done to combat political extremism.

Clearly, Hofstadter had his reservations about the paper, for he opened its preface with a disclaimer: "After having prepared [this memorandum], I am assailed by some doubts as to its value, though I hope these are not more than the usual qualms of authorship. It is not based upon anything that could be called expertise on the groups of the extreme right, but I have tried to reassure myself with the reminder that on this subject there is really no such thing as true expertise, there are merely various degrees of

informed amateurism.”<sup>37</sup> He continued by explaining that he approached the topic by examining the “style of thought” of the extreme right, rather than its institutional structure. And he also explained that his basic model for this “style of thought” came from *The Authoritarian Personality*, which he then utilized in his essay, “The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt,” and later in *The Age of Reform*. Despite crediting Adorno with providing the basic framework of his argument, Hofstadter admitted that “there were many things wrong with the Adorno study.” The most notable was that “it failed to take into account” the possibility “that the authoritarian personality exists among left-wingers as well as among right-wingers.” Hofstadter was convinced that this was in fact the case, and argued that the “American right-winger” was not “a variant of the European fascist,” as Adorno maintained.<sup>38</sup>

While Adorno’s conception of the “authoritarian personality” may have been too limited for Hofstadter’s expanded anti-radicalism, the historian believed that the Adorno study still described the psychological make-up of the typical American right winger. “If I had to boil down the most important features of the rank-and-file extreme right-winger into a single, unfortunately pejorative, characterization,” Hofstadter explained, “he is a poorly educated paranoid whose delusions are to, a large degree, vented against constituted authority.” This was a very derogatory and somewhat speculative description of the American right-winger. And because of the “venturesome” quality of the paper, Hofstadter warned his readers that the memorandum was meant to be “a communication,

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<sup>37</sup> Richard Hofstadter, “The Contemporary Extreme Right Wing in the United States,” (1958), Box 24 -- Richard Hofstadter Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University, i.

<sup>38</sup> Edward A. Shils, “Authoritarianism: ‘Right’ and ‘Left,’” in *Studies in the Scope and Method of ‘The Authoritarian Personality’*, ed. Richard Christie and Marie Jahoda (Glencoe, Illinois, 1954). Hofstadter does not cite this article in the memorandum, however he did cite it in his essay “The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt” (1955)

politically speaking among friends; a confidential document.” “It is not meant to persuade the larger public that the extreme right-wing is wrong or dangerous,” Hofstadter added, “much less is it meant to convert followers of the extreme right from their views.”<sup>39</sup>

This is a somewhat unusual way to begin a professional paper, but Hofstadter needed to feel free to express his thoughts fully. He was trying to get to what he understood as the root problem of the extreme right-wing, and for Hofstadter this was not their particular views on specific issues. The problem with the contemporary right-wing, and the problem with American political behavior throughout the country’s history, according to Hofstadter, was the style in which political issues were approached, or the mind-set that characterized many Americans. This was a difficult concept to convey and in the end Hofstadter had to use an example to illustrate his point. The right-winger might actually be correct about certain things, Hofstadter argued. He agreed that there “has been a good measure of communist infiltration into the federal government.” Yet the destructive way in which the right-winger approached this issue, the way in which he made wild accusations and discerned no shades of gray, made him dangerous. Hofstadter further explained:

It is possible to stand for something that is valid, or partially valid, and yet to stand for it indiscriminately, wildly, madly. A hypothetical illustration will make this clear. The case for the fluoridation of water supplies, though it has the overwhelming bulk of scientific testimony on its side, still leaves some competent scientific observers unconvinced and hostile. Let us suppose for the moment that it should turn out that the minority is in this case correct and that fluoridation should prove clearly unsound. Such a discovery could not for a moment alter the fact that the anti-fluoridation movement has been catnip for cranks – cranks who have obsessions about poisoning, cranks who are opposed to anything any government does whether good or bad, cranks who believe that the Jews are trying to rot out the brains of the Gentiles, health cranks, antivivisectionist cranks,

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<sup>39</sup> Hofstadter, "The Contemporary Extreme Right Wing in the United States," (v.

cranks of all kinds. The fact that they happened to be right on the substantive issue would not in any degree mitigate their crankiness or vindicate the type of arguments they used to oppose fluoridation. Similarly the fact that the extreme right wingers do frequently have a point does not commend their intellectual or mental style. I am not here trying to establish how right or wrong they may be, which calls for substantive inquiry into social issues. I am trying to describe their mentality and technique, which requires an internal analysis of some of their literature.<sup>40</sup>

Hofstadter seemed obsessed with “cranks.” It was an unfortunate term and it hinted at a little crankiness on his part, but it was a shorthand way to refer to a constellation of personality traits that appeared repeatedly in American political extremists. It was not a conservative or fascistic personality type, but rather it appeared to be what Hofstadter called “populist” in orientation. This accounted for the way the right-wing organized itself and the rhetoric it utilized. Fundamentally, Hofstadter insisted, the American right-winger was a populist filled with status envy, who believed that a secret conspiracy had “usurped the constitution” and seized control of the country. Hofstadter argued that this description could be applied to the populists of the 1890s, the isolationists of 1940s, and the John Birchers of the 1950s. The categories of left and right, therefore, were not very useful in identifying potential political extremists. That is to say, Hofstadter believed that the content of their grievances, in terms of the specific issues, were really not relevant. Indeed, there was an almost random quality to the particular issues on which the populist mind would fixate. In the 1890s the populists demanded an income tax; in the 1950s, the populist right-wing demanded its repeal. The common ground was the way in which both groups approached the issue, which was from an “absolutist” position and an unwillingness to compromise.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., vi.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 78-89.

This unwillingness to compromise made the right-wingers impossible to deal with on a political basis. And yet some method to deal with them had to be formulated. Hofstadter's answer was that "the extreme right should be as far as possible cut off from those more respectable persons and agencies through which it purveys its ideas and influences to the larger public."<sup>42</sup> This seems like a difficult task, to say the least, but Hofstadter was convinced it was the only possible course. He wanted to shame the right-wing extremists publicly so that it was difficult for them to infiltrate and influence those organizations that might be hospitable to their views. Hofstadter identified the American Legion, "woman's clubs," and the Catholic Church as examples of inclined to right-wing views. But Hofstadter also believed that these main-stream groups nevertheless sought "respectability" and would shun those labeled "extremists." His purpose was to use public opinion to block the "irrational" right-wing from access to respectable society. "It should be a constant goal," Hofstadter declared, "to establish the fact that the extreme right is a noisy and somewhat pathological minority."<sup>43</sup>

In November 1958 Hallock Hoffman sent a letter to Hofstadter explaining the findings of the board that evaluated the memorandum for the Fund for the Republic. Overall the appraisal was quite negative. Hoffman told Hofstadter that the board found his definition of the right-wing "somewhat fluid, and in the absence of a firm definition, it was hard for them to appraise the extent to which your evidence demonstrates a 'right-wing movement' or the extent of the peril such a movement might constitute." The board found little useful information of the American right-wing in Hofstadter's memorandum,

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 98.

and they questioned his choice of historical examples. In general, the board found the memorandum “contradictory.”<sup>44</sup>

Hofstadter, who was visiting Cambridge University at the time, found the time to write an immediate angry reply to Hoffman. Hofstadter complained that there appeared to be a fundamental miscommunication about the purpose of the report. The fund certainly was familiar with his work, he pointed out. Why then, Hofstadter asked Hoffman, did the fund ask him to do this project, if they so disagreed with his understanding of the right-wing? What really bothered Hofstadter was that the board had completely rejected his conception of a “style” of politics. While they seemed preoccupied with the task of identifying each right-winger in the country, Hofstadter believed he had provided them with a general theory that could be employed any time.<sup>45</sup> Hoffman wrote back and tried to calm Hofstadter down. Hoffman apologized for the tone of his first letter, which he wrote, he claimed, without actually being present for the meeting. Overall, Hoffman implied that the board did not disagree with Hofstadter as much as the first letter seemed to indicate.<sup>46</sup>

The truth was that the board’s evaluation was actually worse than Hoffman relayed to Hofstadter. The board consisted of Eugene Burdick, a political scientist from Berkeley, Donald Rivkin, an attorney, Harvey Wheeler, a political scientist from Washington and Lee, Steven Bailey, another political scientist, who came from Princeton, and behavioral psychologist, B.F. Skinner. Also, Hoffman was actually

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<sup>44</sup> Hallock Hoffman to Richard Hofstadter, November 12, 1958, Box 24 -- Richard Hofstadter Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

<sup>45</sup> Richard Hofstadter to Hallock Hoffman, November 26, 1958, Box 24 -- Richard Hofstadter Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

<sup>46</sup> Hallock Hoffman to Richard Hofstadter, December 1, 1958, Box 24 -- Richard Hofstadter Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

present and a participant at the board's meeting. All of these men were used to dealing with a less historical and less theoretical presentation. Skinner objected to Hofstadter's report the most. He found the psychiatric theorizing baseless and thought the entire argument circular. But Skinner appeared to have problems with the entire project. He was skeptical that a non-experimental social science could reveal any useful information about the formation of the right-wing. "What we want," he declared, "is a kind of approach that is not statistical and you can't get information about the individual starting with statistical correlations."<sup>47</sup>

Skinner was the most extreme in his criticism, but all the board members felt that there was a lack of concrete information in Hofstadter's report. The truth is that regardless of the quality of Hofstadter's analysis, he did not really fulfill the fund's requirements. In the original request from the Fund, Hoffman asked a series of questions. One question did address the issue of common themes and ideas, but most questions asked for more specific information, such as: "Are the groups likely to coalesce and offer a threat to the orderly pursuit of our well being? Are these groups necessary to the heart of society? Would their elimination, either by legislation or social repression, modify society toward or away from freedom and justice?" These questions were about assessing an immediate threat, and suggesting what actions to take to neutralize it.<sup>48</sup> And when the board met, they discussed the possibility of enacting laws that would hinder the ability of the right-wing groups to meet publicly. They agreed that such a course was

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<sup>47</sup> Meeting of the Advisors on the Political Parties Pressure Groups and Professional Associations Projects, September 23, 1958, Box 182 -series 8, subseries 7, folder 5; The Fund for the Republic Archives, Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University.

<sup>48</sup> Hallock Hoffman to Richard Hofstadter, December 9, 1957.

neither practical nor constitutional, but the fact that they even considered the possibility shows how off the mark Hofstadter's report was.<sup>49</sup>

Hofstadter presented his idea of a right-wing political style in a more polished form in a speech delivered at Oxford in November 1963. It was published a year later -- just in time to be a commentary on the Goldwater campaign -- in *Harper's Magazine*, under the title, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics."<sup>50</sup> Despite all the flaws of the original report that that Hofstadter wrote for the Fund for the Republic, it did contain some sensible advice. What Hofstadter wanted to do was to change the boundaries of the discourse; he wanted to elevate the rationality and sophistication of American political discourse. Unfortunately, his conception of "interest" and "status" politics was too limited. In essence, Hofstadter relegated what today would be called identity politics to the irrational fringe. In fact, the purpose of politics is far wider than Hofstadter realized. Sometimes, simply participating and airing grievances is enough to alleviate tensions and anxiety.

Despite the flaws in his concepts of "interest" and "status" politics, Hofstadter's desire to expose the nature of the American political "style" was worthy endeavor. The historian was frustrated with the dichotomy of the left and right. He recognized that these categories did not fit the American political experience very well. More significantly, Hofstadter believed that the idea of left and right as fixed categories created a misleading picture of reality and a false sense of security. The particular policy positions of the so-called left and right were constantly shifting in response to the contingencies of the time. His own personal experience had shown Hofstadter how specific policies -- for example,

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<sup>49</sup> Meeting of the Advisors on the Political Parties Pressure Groups and Professional Associations Projects, September 23, 1958.

<sup>50</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*, (New York, 1965), 3-40.

isolationism -- could be identified as a left-wing position and, a few years later, as a right-wing position, only to return as the official position of the radical left a short time there after. According to Hofstadter, there were no firm policy positions or even social attitudes that could be consistently used to identify the extreme left or right. Instead, he sought to focus on the primary symptoms of irrationality -- the way in which politics were approached, or the "style," in which ideas and policies were promoted, rather than the ever shifting ideas and policies themselves. Only in this way, Hofstadter believed, could political extremism be identified and contained.

## CONCLUSION

History has not been kind to the intellectuals I have described in these pages as anti-radical modernists. The problem for their reputations is that history did not unfold the way they wanted, or expected, it to. Richard Hofstadter and Lionel Trilling believed - or perhaps they just hoped -- that they were living in a post-teleological era. They both looked forward to a time when the political and ideological categories of left and right no longer had any appreciable meaning. Trilling imagined the process in which ideological categories faded away as akin to an individual's psychological maturation. It would be as though society finally let go of its childish illusions.

Hofstadter repeatedly argued that, at least in the case of the American experience, the categories of left and right never had any trans-historical meaning. His great hope was that Americans could develop a post-ideological and post-utopian political style. In a lecture given sometime in the mid-sixties, Hofstadter expressed his idea of how politics ought to be conducted:

Politics is the art of the possible; not a field in which our most cherished values can be fully realized. We can work and struggle for them, yes, but to expect them to be realized is utopian. And the utopian is dangerous in politics, whether the utopian mind of the right or the left.<sup>1</sup>

Instead of utopian thinking, Hofstadter wanted a realistic rationalism to prevail. His expectations for the country as a whole were always low. But when it came to the academy, Hofstadter thought that the university could serve as the one sphere in

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Hofstadter, "Lecture on the Place of Principle in Politics," (Box 23, Richard Hofstadter Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University).

American culture that was relatively free of ideological and utopian thinking. This is a thoroughly anti-radical -- in Hofstadter's broad definition of the term -- vision of the university. And it did not happen.

Hofstadter spent the last years of his life negotiating with student radicals and, at the same time, trying to protect the university's autonomy from the political pressures coming from increasingly powerful right-wing politicians. His conception of academic freedom appeared to be collapsing. Instead of being a sphere free of ideological thinking, the university was becoming an ideological battleground. At the same time, Hofstadter saw a resurgent radical left-wing turn to violence to express itself. The extremes seemed to be triumphant, and the "climate of opinion" was turning against the center. Hofstadter desperately tried to employ the analytical techniques that he had described in his writings, including his memorandum for the Fund for the Republic, to understand what was happening.<sup>2</sup> It was to no avail. In 1970 Hofstadter was diagnosed with cancer and died within the year. He was only fifty-four.

Lionel Trilling was as dissatisfied with the sixties as Hofstadter. In his later years, Trilling spoke against the dangers of the "adversary culture" and of the nihilistic tendencies of modern literature. In 1972 he delivered the first annual Thomas Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities. It was titled, "Mind in the Modern World," and was a profoundly pessimistic address. Trilling lamented that the attitude of society toward reason and intelligence – that is toward "the mind" – had profoundly changed since the end of the Second World War, when despite the horrors of that war there was "a prevailing mood of chastened optimism, which involved the expectation that mind would

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Hofstadter and Michael Wallace, eds., *American Violence: A Documentary History*, (New York, 1970).

play a beneficent part in human existence.”<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, declared Trilling, this attitude was no longer shared by most American, especially by the members of the intellectual class. He pointed to evidence of the sea change that was occurring, and he condemned it. The abandonment of the traditional curricula, the rise of postmodern literary criticism, the imposition of affirmative action, the questioning of the validity of “objectivity,” the adversarial stance of contemporary students were described by Trilling as evidence of precipitous cultural decline. And he understood all of this as symptoms of the general distrust in the mind that seemed to be permeating society at that time. It was as if his entire project, his desire to teach Americans to, as Matthew Arnold said, “see the object as in itself it really is,” to use reason and imagination to perceive the world in its totality, with all its complexities, had come to nothing.

Unlike his colleagues, Richard Chase came close to undergoing a dramatic ideological reversal. In a way, this was apropos, since Chase had never really experienced the ideological disappointment of the 1930s in the way that Trilling and Hofstadter did. Chase was always more concerned with the cultural ramifications of his criticism than its political consequences. This is not to say that Chase did not write about political subjects; he certainly did on numerous occasions. However, politics was a total abstraction for Chase. It is easy to see how his political and aesthetic sensibilities were so closely tied together.

By the middle fifties, Chase began to reconsider his anti-radicalism. He came to believe that anti-radicalism was incompatible with his modernist aesthetics. In a sense, Chase returned to Dwight Macdonald’s position -- which Macdonald never left -- that the great enemy of human creativity and genuine freedom was the middlebrow, and that the

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<sup>3</sup> Lionel Trilling, *Mind in the Modern World*, (New York, 1972), 4.

avant-garde was not just the source for authentic culture, it was also a inspiration for political liberation. In a series of articles, Chase gave voice to his newly discovered radical sensibility.<sup>4</sup> His effort culminated with a strange little book called, *The Democratic Vista* (1958).<sup>5</sup> It took the form of a dialogue between one older academic couple and a younger couple new to the university that occurs over the course of a weekend at the older couple's summer house. Naturally the two male characters were English professors.

The publication of this rather personal book came at a price for Chase. His relationship with Lionel Trilling was damaged. Trilling wrote to Chase, to complain about a fictional literary who appears in the dialogue and who Trilling believed was a parody of himself. He told Chase that as he read the book he grew increasingly "angry." Trilling added that he did not understand why this "attack" was launched without any warning, and he wondered what had happened to their "line of communication."<sup>6</sup> Chase responded quickly. He tried to reassure Trilling that the character was a composite of several literary critics that they knew, including, most importantly, Chase himself. "I think it quite clear," he wrote, "that the ideal critic whose ideas Silverman purveys and mangles is not Lionel Trilling along, but someone who may be loosely called Trilling-Blackmur-Leavis-New Critic-Fiedler-Chase -- for he is my student too." As for the

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<sup>4</sup> For example, see Richard Chase, "The Fate of the Avant-Garde," *Partisan Review* 24 (Summer, 1957), 263-375; Richard Chase, "Heresy and Modern Culture," *Dissent* 4 (Spring, 1957), 128-132; Richard Chase, "Neo-Conservatism and American Literature," *Commentary* 23 (March, 1957), 254-261; Richard Chase, "Radicalism Today," *Partisan Review* 24 (Winter, 1957), 45-54.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Chase, *The Democratic Vista: A Dialogue on Life and Letters in Contemporary America*, (Garden City, New York, 1958).

<sup>6</sup> Lionel Trilling to Richard Chase, 21 March 1957, Box 2, The Papers of Lionel Trilling, Butler Library, Columbia University. Note that this letter is from Trilling's collection. It is a carbon copy what he sent to Chase. At some point Trilling thought it was important to preserve this communication. There are no corresponding original or copy of Trilling's letter to Chase in Chase's papers.

“attack” coming from nowhere, Chase pointed out that he had published several articles that showed the change in his “critical dialectic.”<sup>7</sup>

We will never know what Chase thought of the sixties. He died tragically young in 1962 while on summer vacation at his country house in Massachusetts. Trilling gave the eulogy at the memorial service in Chase’s honor. It was a dignified address that closed with the words: “Richard Chase was not a man who was often visited by peace, yet peace is an element of the beauty of what he wrought.”<sup>8</sup> The student newspaper ran an obituary in which Chase was compared to C. Wright Mills, who had also died recently of a congenital heart condition. The obituary began, “In five short months, two creative members of the Columbia Faculty, both in the prime of their lives and professional careers, have died.” It then went on to describe the various achievements of Mills, stressing how the sociologist was constantly challenging the status quo. And so did Chase, according to the article.

What of Chase? He was an academic man who wouldn’t compromise with the spirit of the cultural “middlebrowism” that he believed had overtaken America in the post-war period. In an age when academics seek out a limited niche, a century or an era of activity to which they can painstakingly channel their labors, Chase was rare. As one of his associates in the Columbia English Department said the other day, Chase’s field was “the mind” -- all of the culture.<sup>9</sup>

It was a fine obituary, and Chase’s wife, Frances, saved a clipping and placed it in his papers.

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Chase to Lionel Trilling, March 23, 1957, Box 2, Lionel Trilling Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

<sup>8</sup> Lionel Trilling, "Eulogy For Richard Chase," (1962), Box 2, Richard Chase Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Schulz, "Anti-Middlebrowism," *Columbia Spectator*, Wednesday, Oct 3, 1962.

Anti-radical modernist thought would reach a kind of apex with the publication in 1960 of Daniel Bell's *The End of Ideology*.<sup>10</sup> Subtitled, "On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties," the book described a post-ideological world. Bell argued that society – at least American society, that is – had reached a state of equilibrium between interest groups. Politics no longer involved grand, important, and controversial ideas, but was concerned with the rather mundane task of distributing social goods. While this meant an end to heroic reforming politics, it also meant that the apocalyptic and nihilistic absolutist ideologies that plagued the twentieth century were things of the past.<sup>11</sup> This is a description of a post-teleological world. And perhaps it is the idea of a post-teleological existence that was the most outstanding characteristic of anti-radical modernism. Trilling and Hofstadter's odd defense of liberalism -- a defense that involved criticizing liberalism for its utopian tendencies -- makes sense once it is understood that they did not believe that any fundamental structural social change was possible. For Hofstadter, Trilling and many other Cold War liberal intellectuals, progress was over. That is not to say that they believed that the United States circa 1955 could not be improved. All of the intellectuals I mentioned here considered themselves political liberals, and almost certainly voted for Democrats throughout the 1950s because they believed that the Democrats were committed to the maintenance and expansion of the reforms by the New Deal. However, they tended to regard remaining social problems – African American civil rights, for example – as residual problems left over from an earlier, less rational, less self-aware, and more ideological era.

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<sup>10</sup> Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties*, (Glencoe, Ill., 1960).

<sup>11</sup> Brick describes how the book came out of a 1955 Congress for Cultural Freedom symposium. See Brick, *Daniel Bell and the Decline of Intellectual Radicalism*, 4-5.

There was a lot that was wrong about anti-radical modernism. For one thing, there was an undeniable theme of domination running through the discourse of these intellectuals. It was camouflaged somewhat, but it clearly manifested itself in the elitism that often characterized anti-radicalism. The poet, literary critic, and at times estranged member of the *Partisan Review* circle, Delmore Schwartz, noticed this tendency in Trilling. “Mr. Trilling,” he declared in 1953, “is interested in the ideas and attitudes and interests of the educated class, such as it is and such as it may become: it is this class that he is, at heart, the guardian and the critic.”<sup>12</sup> By the end of his life Trilling was strangely cut-off from the mainstream. He had come to doubt the values of the modernist canon, while his profession became increasingly concerned with the post-modern. Furthermore, his body of criticism seemed dated, more of an artifact from the past than anything else.

Hofstadter also demonstrated a terribly strong sense of elitism. He nearly wrote a book on the history of elites as a response to C. Wright Mills’s *Power Elite* (1960).<sup>13</sup> If it had been written it would have presented a strange contrast with the histories written by the emerging New Left historians who sought to write history from the bottom up. His writings have stood the test of time better than those of Trilling, but there is one glaring weakness that is immediately apparent. Hofstadter never understood religious thought. In 1964, he won another Pulitzer Prize, this time for non-fiction. The book was *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1963) and is perhaps the most complete expression of Hofstadter’s political and cultural philosophy. It was a powerful description of what he had finally come to call “anti-intellectualism,” that is, the basic pathology of American culture. However, when he was writing the book, he sent a manuscript to historian C.

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<sup>12</sup> Tanner, *Lionel Trilling*, 5.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Hofstadter, “Notes for a Study of Elites,” (Box 31 -- Richard Hofstadter Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University).

Vann Woodward to peruse and review. Woodward like the book very much, except that he found Hofstadter's description of the history of fundamentalism incredibly wrong headed. Although Woodward agreed that the contemporary fundamentalist was, more often than not, an anti-Semite and hyper-nationalist, in short, Hofstadter's right-winger, when it came to the past, Woodward felt that Hofstadter simply ignored the facts:

[S]uddenly we are not talking amount present-day fundamentalists or some of them, but fundamentalists throughout our history – “an ancient and thoroughly indigenous refrain,” the amens of “a million sectarians out of the pass ... [sic]”

Dick, you just can't do this. No amount of Adorno, Stougger, Hartley, etc. will sustain it. If you mean by fundamentalists those addicted to “literal scanning of Scripture” you take in a hell of a proportion of the population from the seventeenth down through the nineteenth centuries – including a hell of a lot of intellectuals, even some leading ones way down into the nineteenth century. I see several dangers here. One of them is anachronism; for a lot of people would be accused of opposing things that did not really exists in their time. Of course anti-foreign sentiment is probably as old as human nature or older, but what about bringing this charge against people who – whether they welcome it or not, at least tolerated permitted, begrudged, acquiesced in the greatest peaceful migration-invasion of foreign people in history, maybe thirty million in one century. From time to time outbursts of anti-foreignism occurred and were politically exploited, but I doubt that fundamentalism was the essential element. Quite apart from the anachronism involved, what about lumping together the charges of anti-communism and anti-liberalism together when liberals are anti-communists and vice versa? As for anti-Semitism, you recall our old argument about that. I have just read a dissertation on Simon Barach, whose twenty-five years in South Carolina illustrate something of what I mean. At least I think you ought to make a distinction between twentieth-century fundamentalists and earlier fundamentalists. The man who clings to fundamentalism today is bound to be something of an odd ball and his oddness undoubtedly manifests itself in other ways, including many of the unpleasant traits you attribute to him. But being a fundamentalist before the twentieth century was, I should guess, “normal” for the vast majority of Catholics and Jews as well as Protestants. If a lot of them turned out to have some poisonous prejudices, I don't it was because they were fundamentalists.<sup>14</sup>

There certainly was a lot that these intellectuals got wrong or missed entirely.

One would not get a great sense by reading either Trilling's or Hofstadter's writings from

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<sup>14</sup> C. Vann Woodward to Richard Hofstadter, May 11, 1962, Box 31, Richard Hofstadter Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University.

the 1950s of how the African-Americans were struggling for civil rights during this time. And one would hardly get the sense that there are women, never mind the fact that there was a nascent second wave of feminism brewing. Their aversion to mass culture also blinded them to some of the major trends that were occurring. Ironically, it can be said that Trilling and Hofstadter, and many of the intellectuals that were part of their circle, suffered from a lack of imagination. Nevertheless, it must be recalled that for a time, these men helped shape what was in effect the official ideology of the liberal establishment. They may not have had a great role in creating policy, but they certainly had a role in shaping the “climate of opinion” of an important segment of mid-century educated Americans. And while they missed many of the problems and issues that were affecting their society, the issues and problems that they did address -- political extremism, ideological or utopian thinking, political interference with art, the role of high culture in a democratic society, the role of the university and its need for independence -- are all issues that we still face and their opinions are still worth reading

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