



PROJECT MUSE®

The Future of the Literary Critic: On David Bromwich's
Moral Imagination

Daniel T. O'Hara

symploke, Volume 22, Numbers 1-2, 2014, pp. 325-333 (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5250/symploke.22.1-2.0325>

symploke

editor
Jeffrey S. Eklun

AUSTERITY

Volume 18 Numbers 1-2

➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/566851>

THE FUTURE OF THE LITERARY CRITIC: ON DAVID BROMWICH'S *MORAL IMAGINATION*¹

DANIEL T. O'HARA

The state of literary studies is not good, and it is not likely to improve. I call this situation deinstitutionalization. What I mean by this term can best be seen via a recent historical analogy. In the late 1980s, after a decade of various legal decisions and subsequent changes in policy, it was clear that the deinstitutionalization movement to stop warehousing the mentally ill and disabled (putting them in "cold storage," as it was termed) had succeeded in changing the legal system and many attitudes. It was also clear it had failed to follow through on securing reliable government funding for the community half-way houses and centers that could keep off the streets those formerly incarcerated in large, impersonal, and cruelly neglectful and often abusive, institutions, whose abolishment represented real savings, in every sense.

Having a cousin in one such institution since his childhood, a place that gave its distinguished British name, Penhurst, to a decision for its ultimate closing by the US Supreme Court, I had been a strong supporter of deinstitutionalization. Over time I became disillusioned by this failure to follow through, and by the winning lawyer in this case. For when I again asked him some years later, "What can we do to insure the necessary funding?" he responded snappily that "someone else, sooner or later, will come along to make his name" by tackling that issue.

Similarly, but please remember all analogies limp, once literary study had been deconstructed, ideologically critiqued, and found to be historically complicit with patriarchy and the rise (and now fall) of the bourgeois; and once the "literary" had been found everywhere, in all popular discourses, not isolated in the special rarified language of so-called works of individual genius only understandable by a well-trained and enlightened elite or "priesthood of the imagination" — it was even to be found in student writing; then literature as an institution began to dissolve, roughly thirty-five years or so, its elements (iconic representations and themes) re-absorbed into where,

¹Review of David Bromwich, *Moral Imagination: Essays*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2014.

many said, originally they emerged: the publishing marketplace with its popular consumer categories of genre and sub-genres (nowadays, romance, mystery, horror, sci-fi, etc.).

We find imaginative writing under these categories in every bookstore chain or on Amazon. We find there also something called "literature," which usually means "classics" of the novel, with Shakespeare and some poetry thrown in, a smattering of Greek or modern foreign language masterpieces, in translation. The disintegrating remains—"sems"—of even this scaled down set of texts are currently disseminated via MOOCS (Massive Open Online Courses) on the internet and celebrated by the digital humanities (Arac 2015).

Of course, many did make their names, including myself, such as it is, via one or another of these developments, though often, in my defense, I did express an obvious question or two similar to the one I raised with the snarky lawyer about deinstitutionalization of the asylum. Whether this was to my credit or not, at this point, who am I to say? I will let the reader decide by referring to one of my earliest questionings and critiques of Emersonianism (O'Hara 1983), a title and critique anticipating "The American Psychosis" chapter here.

One result of this situation, and the major reason why the state of literary studies is not good, is that the latent, only sometimes explicit disrespect for literature and literary study in the university held by, first of all, university colleagues ("they're kooks, with no coherent object of study, just the flurries of figures of speech") has become manifest and chronic ("they're irresponsible radicals and despise their own subject"). We can find this attitude everywhere now, as in William Deresiewicz's otherwise intelligent recent piece "How the Novel Made the Modern World" (Deresiewicz 2014), review of Michael Schmidt's 1100 page tome, *The Novel: A Biography* (2014) and Lawrence Buell's only slightly less hefty *The Dream of the Great American Novel* (2014). Poor Buell gets slammed for some clunky academic prose as if he were Derrida wrapped up in de Man with an Adorno bow.

This guilt by association, however tenuous the latter, is so prevalent, and this is the second result, that the humanities as a whole have become tainted by this now pervasive attitude and at a time when funding has been cut by state and federal governments alike, with more and more cuts envisioned and called for; and wealthy alumni and other donors also want to see more bang for their bucks in practical terms they appreciate, those of the bottom-line. Worse of all, perhaps, the ultimate bad result is that upper professional (no longer faculty) administrators, with the mantra of economic flexibility on their lips, as we know, hire primarily "contingent labor" (temporary part or full-time adjuncts) and not tenure-track faculty to staff upwards of two-thirds to three-quarters of undergraduate classes across America.

Consequently, given all these "revolting developments," what could be seen as the "literary" part of the dismantling of the Cold War welfare state, literary study, in whatever modern language or program, produces new PhD's for an already bad job market in which most of the few positions are

truly dead-end. Unlike deinstitutionalization in the original sense, admittedly, training new PhD's or turning them out into the world is not like what happened to the mentally ill and disabled in their institutions, nor is ending up on the streets what generally happens to our graduates; though working in the hospitality industry to supplement part-time or even full-time adjunct teaching can surely cause clinical depression in some as, despite best advice, they shuffle off despondently to do the St Patrick's Day pub crawl.

Into this context, comes David Bromwich and one of his two new books, *Moral Imagination: Essays* (2014). The other book is a superb scholarly study of nearly five hundred pages, *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke: From the Sublime and Beautiful to American Independence* (2014). Bromwich is both a scholar of the romantic tradition and its extensive legacy and a literary journalist who writes on public matters of significant import. Ever since we were assistant professors together at Princeton University in the mid-to-late 1970s, I have found myself in agreement with him on most matters, most of the time. For example, his position articulated in *A Choice of Inheritance: Self and Community from Edmund Burke to Robert Frost* (1989) is a case in point:

A motive for great writing...has been a tension, which is felt to be un-resolvable, between the claims of social obligation and of personal autonomy. That these had to be experienced as rival claims was the discovery of Burke and Wordsworth. Our lives today and our choices are made in a culture where any settlement of the contest for either side is bound to be provisional. There is nothing to approve or regret in such a situation; it is the way things are; and in a time like ours, it is what great writing lives on. (Bromwich 1989, inside jacket copy)

This is reminiscent for me of Lionel Trilling's position in *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (1950), in which he speaks of the genius of the novel (the paradigm for modern literature, in Trilling's eyes), as being its strong formal containment of the great Yes and the great No of a culture at a particularly critical historical moment and that to attempt to resolve forcibly this often tragic conflict and its accompanying tension and paradoxes would be equal, in the end, either to repression or totalitarianism, not to mention, for the stickler he always was, consummate bad taste. Trilling, too, traces his position back through Arnold to Wordsworth and Edmund Burke. So Bromwich in his new book on the "moral imagination," a term he shows originates with Burke, is in very good company.

What I will do next is to lay out the main points in this book about the uses of imagination for moral purposes to see where we can gain, if possible, a perspective to help ourselves out of this present fix. In saying this, I am not looking to the book to provide practical solutions, as if it were a do-it-yourself or self-help book, but rather I am looking to it for what its openly high-minded argument aims to provide via its studied construal's of texts

and focus on the sublime pleasures of literary style: imaginative examples of inspired choices in humanly attempting to lead the moral life.

As Bromwich defines it, following Edmund Burke and others in the post-romantic tradition who revise and extend Burke, moral imagination is "the power that compels us to grant the highest possible reality and the largest conceivable claim to a thought, action, or person that is not our own, and not close to us in any obvious way. The force of this idea of moral imagination is to deny that we can ever know ourselves sufficiently to settle on a named identity that prescribes our conduct or affiliations. Moral imagination therefore seems to me inseparable from the freedom that is possible in [democratic] society" (2014a, xii). Bromwich in the chapter "Moral Imagination" goes on to show how it appeals to the sense of the self we have been, and more, still wish to become by means of our free choices and free expressions (26-27). In this complex way, society and self, autonomy and community, are held together in a creative tension that literature most effectively exemplifies, even today.

The readings that Bromwich performs on Wordsworth's "Idiot Boy," the scathing portrayal of the psychiatric buzz-word "proportion" in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, Lincoln's writings on slavery and emancipation, Whitman's "Song of Myself" and other poems from the original 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, among other mostly famous texts, including those by Shakespeare like *Macbeth* informing Lincoln's temptation to wield unrestrained power—with Irving Feldman's "Interrupted Prayers" and "In Theme Park America" being two notable and inspired exceptions to familiar masterpieces—all such literary criticism, in the finest sense, adds up to an impressive demonstration through the experimental or trial-run manner of the essay form that may be most remarkable not so much for the rediscovery of literature's powers of moral imagination as for the presentation of this author's own such powers in stylistically memorable prose. Two of my favorite essays are "The American Psychosis" and "How Publicity Makes People Real" because they deal with a subject, the continuing influence of Emerson ("Emersonianism") that I too have long lamented and criticized, and it is always good to find such a powerful ally fighting against what Quentin Anderson called "the imperial self" forty years ago or so. This is the self which paradoxically feels most alive, most realized, when turning away from the difficult details of everyday life, finding refuge in its wholly imaginary and grandiose "aboriginal self" (in Emerson's words from "Self-Reliance"), which only usually appalled recognition by others, nowadays, digital recognition usually on the internet and social media sites, though as our increasing number of mass-shootings show, too often realized by means of actual spilt blood.

"The American Psychosis" traces the extent of this tradition and its self-critique, from Emerson and Whitman, through Dickinson to Henry James (with a brilliant reading of "The Jolly Corner"), to the novelists of the 1960s. As in my own work on some of these figures and texts over the years, Bromwich wisely concludes with a warning connecting the economic,

political, and literary and other imaginative productions of American culture, past, present, and future:

These pages [of the chapter] have sketched a tendency that is not exhausted. The American psychosis has not yet come to anything like a provisional end. One sign of its prevalence is the way the myth (of the antinomian self) is assumed as a challenge even by gifted writers who are not quite possessed by it—Mailer in *An American Dream*, Bellow in *Henderson the Rain King*. Through all testimony, one fact anyway stands out with distinctness. This is the growing importance of money as a dissolvent of manners and customs, money as an image of something deeper than experience, money as a power that converts every rival symbolism to a language of its own. In every period of our history, but never more so than today, money has been the leveler by which self-engrossment is made to adapt to a surface ideal of gregarious practicality. Money has taken increasingly to itself the obscure and compelling charge that Emerson assigned to the hidden self. It has the right kind of abstraction, and the right kind of opacity. It is at once an embodiment and a creator of value: the further from any produced object, the better. It is the thing, more convenient than a person that absolves you to yourself. By comparison with money, the soul has lapsed to the inferior reality of an entity that cannot be modified or exchanged. It would take a novelist of James's powers to focus "the thousand-eyed present" [in his own words] on a communion so purified of people that even the self has become a name for a thing. (220-221)

By money in this sense, Bromwich means, of course, "capital," as Thomas Piketty in *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2014) has brilliantly retaught us to understand. As for the intuition here that James be the standard by which to measure the present moment, I am glad to see that my argument, both in *Empire Burlesque* (2003) and *Visions of Global America* (2009), confirms it in parallel fashion if at considerably greater length. All this agreement with and praise for Bromwich's *Moral Imagination: Essays* is not to say the book is perfect. I will enumerate its flaws, all relatively minor in my eyes, in no particular order before returning to add my conclusion.

The book, like any one by Bromwich's Yale mentor, Harold Bloom, is shorn of most scholarly apparatus, so that in looking for the original context for a quotation the scrupulous reader does not know which edition has been used. This is not only a matter of convenience but at times can be of considerable interpretive significance. Likewise is the repeated use in the book of the revisionary writer's favorite evasion of the tangle of details in the history of interpretation of a classic or controversial text: that is, going back to the originator of the tradition for one's text (but without citation to which edition) and confronting the great original *mano e mano* with little or none of the scholarly history or critical debate taking away from the revisionist's scintillating aperçus. This tactic makes me queasy in every scholarly

bone. A similar twinge is caused by the inadequate index. In looking up Trilling's name, for instance, there is no entry, yet on page 57, there is one telling reference, in Bromwich's searching disagreements about identity politics with Michael Walzer and Charles Taylor, especially to the former's alleged misunderstanding of Trilling's *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1971). (The allegation is correct, by the way).

Now, given Trilling's long-standing use of "moral realism" and "moral imagination" to mean much of what Bromwich means here by it, too, one might have expected there would be more references, so that whoever did the index would not now be so easily forgivable, perhaps, for missing just this one lone passing reference. Publishing a big book on Trilling, *Lionel Trilling: The Work of Liberation* (1988), I may be more acutely sensitive to this specific omission than others might be, I admit.²

Finally, the book also concludes in a series of dying falls after the magnificent essays on the topics and figures I have previously mentioned. Chapter 12, "Comments on Perpetual War," assembles five shorter pieces (reviews and conference statements): "Cheney's Law," "Euphemism and Violence," "William Safire: Wars Made Out of Words," "What 9/11 Makes Us Forget," "The Snowden Case." If the book had stopped at page 303 and not gone on to 344, not only would nothing have been really missed, but this book would have then been gem-like and in the best setting. This is so not because of the content of these polemical pieces, but simply for their brevity, however much one agrees with their sentiments or positions.

To conclude on a more positive note, however, I want to exhibit Bromwich reflecting on "Shakespeare, Lincoln, and Ambition." He shows in this chapter how it is strongly likely that Lincoln's intense reading and reflection on his admittedly favorite Shakespearean play, *Macbeth*, contributed significantly to his public stand on the Mexican War and on his subsequent overcoming of temptation, when president, to serve his own desire for fame and power, rather than the less personally satisfying, grinding service to the daily needs of the war effort to save the Union, whether like Whitman visiting the sick and wounded, or otherwise. Here is Bromwich in one of his best moments in *Moral Imagination*, and at the full length of his song:

If Lincoln's Speech on the Mexican War seemed to say that the love of power has an inward drive, an energy that feeds on itself, this note on Stephen Douglas eight years later indicates the origin of that momentum in *political* ambition. And there is something strangely impersonal, maybe we should say something de- personifying, about ambition. It takes you out of yourself. By its dynamism, you become a name, and the sound of that name may fill the nation and be known in foreign lands: but who is the person under the name? Where ambition takes its full swing, it is as if a break in oneself had occurred, out of the need to acquire fame or power from a force

²For a representative sample of Trilling's essays, see Trilling (2000).

outside oneself, a force that reaches in and pulls without letup or allowance for thought. The person who has become a prey to that force is "swept on and on" [as Macbeth himself says].... Ambition then has this egotistical motive, the wish to leave a deep impression on the world; yet the effects of ambition, its momentum and pressure for external aggrandizement and its instrumental use of available objects and other people, all lead away from any proper self or individuality. The lips of the office mumble the words for an act of state no person could ever vouch for. By the changes wrought by ambition the person disappears into the force-field of the act. For the person captured by ambition, the power of agency increases vastly, while the identity of the actor dwindles to the sum of his effects. The mask becomes the face; and it is a quality of ambition that the person whom it seizes is half aware that this *will* happen, sees it start to happen, and wants it to go on happening. He wants it even as he may feel that the mask weighs heavily, and even as he regrets that the expression on the face of the actions is no longer his own. The ambitious politician was once a person, but a person with this peculiar germ in his constitution that he was willing to be changed utterly by the necessities of power. Achieved ambition is success at undergoing that change. (171-172)

This extraordinary passage on the ecstasy of ambition reads like the critical analysis of an intimate, perhaps even bordering on a critical self-analysis, at least of an earlier self, perhaps even of the self that is existing the instant before the reading begins. Such spontaneity of self-revision, staged here in the round, as it were, is what even the deinstitutionalized literary critic of the future, I believe, can still do for us, thanks to the work of such masters of moral imagination.

TEMPLE UNIVERSITY

References

- Arac, Jonathan. "Defining an 'Age of the Novel' in the United States." *New Directions in the History of the Novel*. Ed. Patrick Parrinder. New York and London, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2015.
- Bromwich, David. *A Choice of Inheritance: Self and Community from Edmund Burke to Robert Frost*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard UP, 1989.
- _____. *Moral Imagination: Essays*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2014a.
- _____. *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke: From the Sublime and Beautiful to American Independence*. Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press at the Harvard UP, 2014b.
- Deresiewicz, William. "How the Novel Made the Modern World." *The Atlantic* (June 2014). <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/how-the-novel-made-the-modern-world/361611/>
- O'Hara, Daniel T. "Revisionary Madness: The Prospects of American Literary Criticism at the Present Time." *Critical Inquiry* 9.4 (June 1983): 726-742.
- Piketty, Thomas. *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Trans. Arthur Goldhammer. Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press at the Harvard UP, 2014.
- Trilling, Lionel. *The Moral Obligation to Be Intelligent: Selected Essays*. Ed. and Introduction by Leon Wieseltier. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000.