IRONY AND RADICALISM

The world is no stage, with the ironist as audience. . . . He is as much part and parcel of the human show as any of the people he studies. . . . If the ironist is destructive, it is his own world he is destroying; if he is critical, it is his own world that he is criticizing. And his irony is his critique of life.

—Randolph S. Bourne, “The Life of Irony”

“The real trouble with middleclass radicalism in this country today,” Bourne wrote before the war, “is that it is too easy.” His concern was with the romantic anticapitalism of middle-class intellectuals, which often seemed to turn American radicalism into a spectator sport. Progressive and socialist intellectuals spent their energies in easy sympathy with fashionable causes—in support for the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) or anarchist groups—as their members were deported or their strikes were broken by the government or corporate security forces, instead of doing the hard work of formulating a theory of radical democracy on which to form an alliance of the middle classes and the labor movement. Ignoring the struggles of “the oppressed masses and excluded races at home,” they waited to see what the Russians would “do for the world.”
Yet there was work to be done in formulating a radical philosophy that linked democratic strivings at home with those abroad, for the war had revealed that class allegiances cut across national boundaries. "The real arena lies in the international class-struggle, rather than in the competition of artificial national units." An American radicalism that had conformed to a narrowly conceived nationalism would miss the opportunity to build a radical philosophy for an international alliance. Bourne called the young radicals back to the social movement and back to their origins as intellectuals. "The only way middle-class radicalism can serve is by being fiercely and concentratedly intellectual." They must resist the temptation to "put aside their university knowledge" and "disguise" their intellectualism; they must not be reluctant to debate ideas or to risk offending the labor movement. "The young radical today is not asked to be a martyr, but he is asked to be a thinker, an intellectual leader."

If the idea of intellectual leadership still had appeal for Bourne in 1916 it was because it spoke to the sense of possibility that he and other progressive, pragmatist, and socialist intellectuals shared about the role of ideas in effecting social change. In those years they believed that the application of intelligence to social problems could remove the social ills of poverty and illiteracy. Some progressives argued that a philosophy of social democracy would restore a sense of individualism to counter the corrupt influence of large corporations and trusts. The culture critics of the *Masses* and the *Seven Arts*, including Bourne, were convinced that discourse, specifically cultural criticism, would revitalize cultural sensibilities and invigorate political knowledge. These middle-class intellectuals held stock in the power of discourse to shape consciousness and to influence social practices. The purpose of the intellectual vocation was to make a practical difference in social struggle.

In particular, the new class of culture critics, according to Alan Trachtenberg, carved out a new social role for themselves as non-academic, generalist intellectuals whose point of view was shaped by the role they created. They lived and worked as William James had predicted American intellectuals would in the twentieth century, that is, most of them gave up comfortable middle-class careers, separated themselves from universities, and opted for the
public culture of cafes and literary societies. James had welcomed the shift of the center of power from the university to the cosmopolitan collective because, he argued, it would free the individual to express the “personal point of view.”

Bourne’s own antiorganizational sentiments mirrored James’s. Fearful of the conformist influence of organized groups and institutions on individual expression, he encouraged the idea of leadership as a form of engagement or political commitment working outside the “centripetal” force of institutions. Calling young intellectuals to a “restless, controversial criticism of current ideas,” he used the concept of the intellectual as a counterweight to the “martyr-complex” of the middle-class radical. For him intellectual vanguardism was explicitly a Sorelian myth to inspire political involvement. “Most of us have given up looking on ourselves as heroes and martyrs,” he wrote to dispel the romanticism in the idea of the radical as social outlaw. The idea of intellectual leadership was at best a “vital myth,” an impossibility that could point to no tangible results. It was a symbol to discourage delusions of independence (detachment) and the martyrdom of a misunderstood truth-bearer.

Despite his effort to discourage a modernist romance around the idea of intellectual leadership, Bourne’s wartime writings about the role of an “irreconcilable” critic carried some of the symbolic weight of the individual speaking truth to power. Even so, in examining his writings both before and during the war, it is clear that he understood not only the limits of criticism but also that every theory of intellectual leadership privileged the voices of intellectuals over those of the majority. In this sense, it was an ironic stance that he proposed for the radical intellectual: to be at once inside the society of which he was, at the same time, a critic.

In another sense, his conception of the role of the intellectual can be seen to stand at the cusp between modernity and postmodernity. As Ross Posnock has argued, Bourne’s conception was cast in terms that went beyond the antinomies of the role of intellectuals as either dégagé or engagé, detached or committed, involved concretely in the material world or retreating to the high abstraction of political philosophy. He wrote as Theodor Adorno has suggested of the immanent critic, “in and through contradiction,” coming from a divided society (between the Brahmin elite
and a new transnational majority), unwilling to resolve contradictions in a transcendentalist philosophy.\(^6\)

Bourne himself came from a fractured genealogy that had an enduring effect, in the double-sided pressure to be both insider and outsider. As a radical critic, I argue, he developed a double-sided sensibility, comfortable with “intellectual suspense” that not only worked its way into his political imagination but also became an integral part of his radicalism, distinctive for its doubled meanings, anticipating what M. M. Bakhtin calls internal dialogization. Bourne’s ironic radicalism was a political strategy for dealing with opposition and contradiction in modern consciousness.\(^7\)

The title of this chapter, borrowing from the final chapter of Thomas Mann’s *Reflections of a Non-Political Man*, ironically inverts Mann’s prescription for the apolitical intellectual and scholar. The stance Bourne assumed was the opposite of Mann’s: a stance of political engagement, skepticism, and commitment to radical dissent. Irony was a basis for critical judgment based in contradiction that allowed both detachment and commitment for the radical critic. Put simply, Bourne developed a discursive response—within language itself and as part of particular genres (critical philosophy, autobiography, political polemic)—that complemented his personal marginality. As an unregenerate or “irreconcilable” critic, he engaged in the free play of genres and discursive strategies, strategies anticipating Bakhtin’s conception of carnivalization—with radical content. The strategic use of irony, in particular, reflected Bourne’s unwillingness to resolve contradictions that were unsolvable and his preference that they remain in a doubled-over relation to the other.\(^8\)

In a college essay examining classical irony, Bourne admired it as the “science of comparison,” a philosophical method used by Plato that contrasted the “is and the ought” in order to generate an ideal of justice that was complex, individuated, and grounded in contemporary reality. The Platonic “gift of living analogy” used examples from daily life persuasively to illustrate and make more relevant the more abstract ideal. Bourne particularly admired the dialogic use of divergent perspectives to give *The Republic*, in his reading, a
pluralist and ironically a relativist perspective, combining the aesthetic sensibility of the “poet” with the “critical realism” of the “economist,” “educator,” “historian,” and “psychologist,” “welded together in one living tissue of thought.” In contrast to the “matter of fact . . . materialism” of the time, Plato’s idealism showed that “all is not what it appears to be” and that real disagreements over meaning could be traceable to a lived subjectivity; yet his idealism was also tempered and informed by those various and contentious points of view representing the multiple nature of experience. The dialogue looked at experience(s) from many sides, the apparent as well as the latent, and expressed Plato’s own perceptions in alternating voices—scientific, aesthetic, metaphysical.9

Clearly a revisionist, almost Jamesian reading of classical Platonism, Bourne’s interpretation moved away from the dialogue’s central distinction between theory and practice to one between the is and the ought, a move James would have endorsed to release American philosophy from debates over metaphysics and determinism. Bourne’s interpretation of Socratic irony was equally revisionist and equally Jamesian, appreciating the artful deception used as an investigative tool to uncover hidden meanings and to draw out the inner, unrealized knowledge of his interlocutors, which could be tested in dialogue and interaction. From this interpretive interchange, social truths were constructed. Socratic irony, like James’s radical empiricism, helped create truth in the intersubjective exchange of perceptions and observations to be weighed, evaluated, and judged by a community of interpreters.10 Moreover, the Socratic veil, a charade to demystify and destroy false idols, became a kind of second nature to Socrates; in Bourne’s words, it was not simply a “method” but a “life,” a way of seeing and making sense of experience in practice. Socrates’ irony was “no mere by-product but the very root and soul of his character,” an inseparable feature of his “autobiography.”

As he did in his own autobiography, Bourne focused on the interaction between personality and social structure. Irony was realized in social interaction, not in the solitary remove of the contemplative scholar. “The daily fabric of the life of irony is woven out of our critical communing with ourselves and the personalities of our friends, and the people with whom we come in contact.”11
It used the benefits of both science and art in its judgments: as the science of comparison, it measured contemporary realities against one’s ideals; as the art of analogy it tapped the human capacity to create, through the apollonian art of interpretation and imagination, restoring consciousness to its proper role as the stimulus to action. It also suggested a philosophical independence, in form as well as content. Somewhere between the passionate commitment of an ideologue and the dispassionate stance of the scientist, the ironic critic might combine both virtues. Socratic irony showed how irony could be both radical and engaged. In Bourne’s construction, Socrates was not Nietzsche’s disinterested scholar, the theoretical man and archdemystifier, the enemy of enchantment. He was a partisan who brought values to bear. He spoke not from logic only, or from tradition, but from the inspiration of discovery and invention, creating a “city of words.” Bourne’s reading of Socratic irony was, thus, more ironical than Mann’s, and even Nietzsche’s at times, resting on the belief in the imaginative potential of the very intellectual act of demystification. In his view irony was creative, but so was radicalism.

“The Life of Irony,” published in 1913, counterbalanced the intimate, intensely personal “philosophy of handicap” of his 1911 essay with its abstraction and theorization of political agency, distancing Bourne from his personal genealogy to an intellectual one that could be useful for other young radicals of the middle class. Daniel Aaron recognized the importance of the essay to Bourne’s work as a whole. “Much of Bourne’s philosophy of life is contained in ‘The Life of Irony’—the detached probings of the ironist, the search for the measurable stuff of personality, the agile putting on and off of masks and characters.” The essay theorized the self-masking Bourne employed in his writing and the unstable position he occupied as a critic “who cannot yet crystallize, who does not dread suspense.” The shifting identities and roles—first as author, then as friend of protagonist, then as narrator and interlocutor—signified the disembodiment of his corporeal marginality, a way of “making over the body,” in Bourne’s phrase, by taking on the personality of another and making it his own. As a form of self-distancing, irony was also a means of joining that democratic community of interpreters, following Charles Peirce, creating democratic truths.
Bourne’s central argument in the essay was that irony was best understood not as a trope but as a lived experience that comes in accepting contradiction. “Things as they are, thrown against the background of things as they ought to be,—this is the ironist’s vision.” The ability to endure contradiction, to live in the gap between the is and the ought, resulted from living a doubled existence, the common condition in modern society. Early modern theorists had sought to heal the split—that is, to restore a unity to the alienated self (Rousseau), or to reaffirm a species essence to class-identified individuals (Marx), or to transcend it in a universalist state (Hegel). Bourne, however, saw the contradictions of modernity as important to sustain. The gap between the is and the ought opened a space for a regulative ideal to guide social transformation. Anticipating Marcuse’s critical theory, Bourne’s embrace of absurdity and contradiction in the modern experience was an acknowledgment that negation had creative value in that the competition between opposites was understood as the agent of change and of individual release. On these grounds Bourne argued for the retention of contradictions in society and in the self.

“The ironist is born and not made,” an ironic claim for a student of pragmatism who understood the natural as a product of one’s experience. One’s nature, in this sense, was created, not acquired. Yet his naturalizing of irony underscored his thesis that the ironic disposition was “not a pose or an amusement” but an integral part of one’s life. Because “a life cannot be taken off and put on again at will . . . as if it were some portable commodity, or some exchangeable garment,” the life of irony was more than a guise or a mask; it was experiential and thus, on one level, constitutive of the self. The ironist understood the appearance/reality opposition and would play with the signifiers. Yet if irony were not a cloak to be taken on and off but a part of oneself, the ironist could step outside the self—could take the self on and off, as it were—first as an observer, then as a participant, then to step in the shoes of another, in an expression of amour de soi. In this sense irony was superior to introspection because it has “no [fixed] perspective or contrast” so that the ironist could get outside himself and “view himself objectively.” The self-distancing and deliberate alienation maximized the critical sense. It unsettled one’s certainty; it challenged one’s complacency.
Most important for his political philosophy, irony was the basis of solidarity with others. “It is not true that by examining ourselves and coming to an understanding of how we behave we understand other people, but that by the contrasts and little revelations of our friends we learn to interpret ourselves.” The presumed detachment of an ironic observer was its opposite: a means of getting out of oneself (amour propre) to bond with others. “Many of our cherished ideals would lose half their validity were they put bodily in the mouths of the less fortunate.” By “putting himself in another’s place” and adopting “another’s point of view,” he “lost his egotism completely.” Irony was a vehicle for democratic camaraderie, a political tool of personal affiliation.

The most illuminating experience that we can have is a sudden realization that had we been in the other person’s place we should have acted precisely as he did. To the ironist this is no mere intellectual conviction that, after all, none of us are perfect, but a vivid emotional experience which has knit him with that other person in one moment in a bond of sympathy that could have been acquired in no other way.15

Therefore, ironic detachment, often misunderstood as a barrier, was not destructive to identity; it affirmed one’s humanity. “Irony is . . . the truest sympathy,” drawing one into sympathetic understanding of the experiences of others. Its skepticism did not deaden one’s sensitivity; it leavened it. It became “a necessary relief from the tension of too much caring. It is his salvation from unutterable despair.” Here Bourne drew on his personal genealogy, the anhedonia of the sick soul and the uncertainty of his unresolved status as a divided self. Through a shift in perspective, an inclusivity of points of view, and a “sense of proportion,” irony permitted one to lose one’s self-absorption. “He acquires a more tolerant, half-amused, half-earnest attitude towards himself.” Irony’s “critical attitude” gave one a “temporary escape, a slight momentary reconciliation, a chance to draw a deep breath of resolve before plunging into the fight. It is not a palliative so much as a perspective.”16

With the ironic sensibility as a political stance, Bourne found the discursive stance from which he could gain some distance from his
own position of being “in but not of the world.” It meant he could understand himself, his society, and the role he might play in it as an “unintegrated self,” using irony as the alternative to both “bad conscience” (guilt) and ressentiment (rancor), responses of the self-defeated in Nietzsche’s terms. The ironic mind recognized contradiction in personal and social experience and mirrored it. “Absurdity is such an intrinsic part of the nature of things that the ironist has only to touch it to reveal it.” If modern social life were fundamentally contradictory, the absurdity of the ironic mind was part of it.

“To the ironist it seems that irony is in the things themselves, not in the speaking,” in the doubled meaning in the gaps between signifiers. In recognizing the distinction between the represented and its representation, Bourne also problematized it, anticipating the postmodern understanding but in a way that did not collapse the boundaries between “things” and their “speaking.” The world maintained its own boundaries, but under an ironic gaze, it became a text. His analysis opened up the possibility of blurring conventional boundaries—between the normal and the deviant, the sane and the insane—but without destroying them. From the perspective of the radical critic, the deviant—the discontented voices of the “forgotten masses and excluded races at home”—became the norm. As Olaf Hansen notes, “Truth is thus established in the process of gradually eliminating the balance between the normal and the exception, shifting it around until we look at the normal as the exception.”

The political premise of the argument was made more apparent through the aesthetic analogy of modern photographic technology that Bourne used to illustrate irony’s critical, demystifying technique. “The ironical method might be compared to the acid that develops a photographic plate,” highlighting what is already there. It did not “distort the image but merely brings to light all that was implicit in the plate before.” Similarly irony, “the photography of the soul,” revealed elements of the subject that would be otherwise overlooked in a literal (representational) reading. “The picture goes through certain changes in the hands of the ironist, but without these changes the truth would be simply a blank, unmeaning surface.” As the crystals on the plate revealed various “values and
beauty” when light fell upon it at different angles, so irony exposed the aspects of its subject to different light. While the photographic plate presented a reverse image of its subject, irony, in presenting the “photographic negative of the truth,” reversed and inverted traditional valuations. “Irony revel[s] in a paradox . . . truth with the values reversed.” Irony transvalued values and tested them against the standard of contemporary “social validity” and democratic interchangeability.¹⁹

Democratic truth, the political ground of Bourne’s conception of modern irony, emerged in discourse. “The deadliest way to annihilate the unoriginal or the insincere is to let it speak for itself. Irony is this letting things speak for themselves and hang themselves by their own rope. Only it repeats the words after the speaker and adjusts the rope.” The ironical outlook tested opinions by “transplanting” them to the “lips of another.”

If an idea is absurd, the slightest change of environment will show that absurdity. The mere transference of an idea to another’s mouth will bring to light all its hidden meanings. . . . If a point of view cannot bear being adopted by another person, if it is not hardy enough to be transplanted, it has little right to exist at all.²⁰

The modern ironist was thus “the great intellectual democrat in whose presence and before whose law all ideas and attitudes stand equal.” His democracy extended to the final selection of truth. “If irony destroys some ideals, it builds up others. . . . Those it does leave standing are imperishably founded in the democratic experience of all men.” In this sense the ironist was a pragmatist; he tested ideas “by their social validity, by their general interchangeability among all sorts of people and the world.” Deriving his ideals from experience, he tested them against the same experience. He “compares things not with a fixed standard but with each other, and the values that slowly emerge from the process . . . are constantly revised, corrected, and refined by that same sense of contrast.” If politics privileged speech, irony undercut the orthodox and the parochial, initiating a counternarrative to challenge the culture of the last Puritan.²¹
In several respects then, an ironic critique is similar to a dialectical one. Like the dialectic, it understood appearance as deceptive and contradiction to be in the “nature of things.” Unlike the dialectic, however, it did not see contradiction as the dynamic by which men could be lifted to ever higher levels and eventual fulfillment. It did not rely on a transcendent telos to redeem humankind. It left contradiction alone, untranscended, expressing different possibilities and different experiences of social truth. The ironic for Bourne can be seen as similar to that of Bakhtin’s conception of the parodic. Both irony and parody, unlike the dialectic, do not offer a new synthesis but remain in a doubled relation to the original. Thus Bourne was able to accept the fact that a belief and its opposite were both true, and both were possible to hold at the same time (“man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains”). Irony made it possible to endure contradictions critically, to acknowledge that contradictory truths could be held simultaneously, without resolving them. Irony allowed him to accept and even welcome “contradictory situations” and impossible results.

An ironic perspective was therefore not synonymous with cynicism or with satire. Mencken’s cynicism, for instance, in Bourne’s view, revealed a contempt for democracy without at the same time suggesting alternatives. Mencken found it easier to poke fun at the “booboisie” than to take a stand with the “demos” and work to improve society from within. Moreover, for the purely philosophic or literary applications of irony, Bourne had no use. “The kind of aesthetic irony that Pater and Omar display is a paralyzed, half-seeing, half-caring reflection on life—a tame, domesticated irony with its wings cut . . . the result not of exquisitely refined feelings, but of social anesthesia.” Yet the political limitations of irony were equally clear. If the critic’s role was to generate standards of judgment that could stimulate action, irony is not enough on its own. Coupled with radical convictions, however, it defended against mindlessness, lazy generalizations, and apathy. An ironic sensibility that was not at the same time political had no pragmatic value in the modern century. It was an indulgence that was unaffordable, an abdication of one’s membership in the larger social community. The question was not whether the social movement could afford irony, but whether it could get along without it.
In 1914 Georg Lukács described irony as the quintessential stance of the modern novelist, critical at the same time it was descriptive, the vehicle most appropriate for modern literature, a literary disjuncture between bourgeois man and his society. The unity, now lost, between classical man and his world, reflected in the classical art form of the epic, was revealed in the life of the modern protagonist, who is shown to be an estranged seeker of the meaning of existence, retreating “into subjectivity as interiority and [who] strives to imprint the contents of [his] longing upon the alien world.” For Lukács, irony was “the modern method of form-giving,” a constituent part of the modern world and the novelist’s own awareness of the subjective and objective alienation of his protagonist. It was “the highest freedom that can be achieved in a world without a god,” Lukács wrote, showing men the best they could do, in a world out of joint. It signified a “self-correction of the world’s fragility,” both critical (“realist”) and descriptive (“naturalist”). Irony attempted to transform inadequate relations even as it forced men to confront them.22

In a review of Dreiser’s work, Bourne described his realism in terms that suggested substantial agreement with early Lukácsian aesthetics. Dreiser’s technique illustrated a modern aesthetic that captured the alienation experienced by ordinary Americans and a variety of perspectives to describe their efforts to find meaning and attain self-determination in the chaos of the modern city. On the one hand, according to Bourne, Dreiser distanced himself from his characters, presenting them as “rather vacuous people, a little pathetic in their innocence of the possibilities of life and their optimistic truthfulness,” “unconscious of their serfdom” to the “great barons of industry.” The disjuncture between his awareness of the chaotic interplay of wills-to-power and their unconscious innocence buffeted about in the great cities of America illustrated the kind of ironic contrast Lukács had described. Further, Dreiser distanced himself from his characters without at the same time “convicting” them, in Bourne’s words. He took their experiences of modern life’s cruelty and beauty as a given, “neither praising nor blaming” his characters for their weaknesses and misfortunes but recognizing “how much more terrible and beautiful and incalculable life is than any of us are willing to admit.” Although literary brokers
found Dreiser’s ethical standards shockingly nihilist or libertarian, Bourne saw them as refreshingly realistic and compassionate, the judgments of a “moral democrat.”

The role of the critic and intellectual suggested in Mann’s *Reflections of a Non-Political Man* can be seen as the theoretical antithesis to Bourne’s understanding of the political use of irony. The differences between Mann’s conception of the political responsibility of intellectuals and Bourne’s illustrate the fundamentally conservative and the profoundly radical interpretations of the role of the intellectual and the ironic mind in a modern, fragmenting society. Mann’s *Reflections*, written five years after Bourne’s essay, inveighed against the tendency of contemporary intellectuals to become involved in political controversies. The modern intellectual must choose art, not politics, as the only appropriate place for his creativity. Mann warned fellow intellectuals (including his politically active brother) and artists that they must choose between irony (as expressed in art) or radicalism (as evidenced in democratic activism and abstract intellectualism). Irony and radicalism, Mann held, are antitheses—an “Either-Or”—in sharp contrast to Bourne’s fundamental integration of irony and radicalism, whether in art or in criticism.

Mann, of course, like Nietzsche before him, wanted to rescue men from the recesses of science, religion, and philosophy and from the excessive intellectualism of the apollonian will. Irony returned man to the innocence of the dionysian, sustaining life and eros. Only irony was creative, Mann insisted, evoking the sublime and the spiritual from the abyss of tradition. But his reading of Nietzsche was also deeply conservative, associated with all that was sublime in the German character, nation, and tradition and distinctly not the tool of the new socialist or of democratic politics. His retranslation of Nietzsche ignored the fact that Nietzsche wanted to combine art and politics in a “gay science,” to enable men to live an aesthetic life that had political consequences as well, as suggested in the idea of an “artistic Socrates.” The question for the scholar, as for the poet, Nietzsche suggested, was not whether one was conservative or radical but whether one’s activities were “life-affirming” or “life-denying.” Life-affirming intellectual activity gave men (and women) standards for judgment and thereby
helped them avoid nihilism. Although intellectuals could not create forms, they could generate values that gave meaning to forms created by artists and poets. The “hardest test of independence” for the intellectual was “not to remain stuck in one’s own detachment, to that voluptuous remoteness and strangeness of the bird who flies ever higher to see ever more below him” but to learn to “conserve oneself” and remain connected to the stream of human experience.

The dangers of excessive detachment and abstractness were clear to Bourne as well, even before the war, when political contingency dominated public discourse. “If irony is the virtue of philosophers, abstractness . . . is their vice.” Specifically he meant to warn against becoming a “lonely Zarathustra,” withdrawing to the “mountain top,” avoiding human contact. With detachment, his vision would be lifeless. “Without people and opinions for his mind to play on, his irony withers and faints.” His feet must be firmly planted in the empirical world. “Like the modern city, he is totally dependent on a steady flow of supplies from the outside world. . . . This world is his nourishment.” Using a feminine signified of the early twentieth century (the New Woman as associated with the chaos and disorder of the modern city), Bourne showed irony to be a part of the dionysian.

But Bourne’s view of the role of the radical critic was also an implicit admission of the limits of criticism. In a 1912 letter, he acknowledged the embattled and often impossible premises of the critic’s project, particularly in a society ambivalent about intellectualism.

Criticism . . . constantly conscious . . . of its limitations . . . struggle[s] heroically and resolutely up a path to a goal that it knows it will never achieve. And yet somehow that march, predestined as it is to failure, aids countless wayfarers, whose eyes would be otherwise fixed stonily on the ground, to see the vision at the goal and be glad.

The futility of criticism was ironically its raison d’être, the role of the critic possible only because it was an impossible one. The myth of intellectual leadership was even more necessary to inspire a
“relentless criticism of everything existing.” The combination of irony and radicalism began to suggest a political solution to Bourne’s choice of vocation at the same time that it gave him a point of view that was shaped by that social role. Along with the other culture critics of his generation, he would go without institutional affiliation and without access to power but would try to create a new role, with new power, in which public criticism could contribute to what they called the “American promise.”

Only war presented a unique situation, Bourne argued, because discourse became one-dimensional and political debate became polarized into either/or propositions: one must be prowar or antwar; there was no in-between. The choice proved unacceptable to those intellectuals who “cannot yet crystallize” or to those who did not dread “intellectual suspense.” During wartime and in times when a war economy was operating, the ironic critic became an outlaw, a radical by virtue of his “irreconcilability” to the positions offered. Writing “below the battle,” he could retain his irony—and his radicalism. He could, inverting Mann’s meaning, be both creative and radical.