One keeps healthy in wartime not by a series of religious and political consolations that something good is coming out of it all, but by a vigorous assertion of values in which the war has no part.

—Randolph S. Bourne, “A War Diary”

It is the creative desire more than the creative intelligence that we shall need if we are ever to fly.

—Randolph S. Bourne, “Twilight of Idols”

Perhaps it was Lewis Mumford who gave currency to the idea of Bourne as a war casualty retreating from politics in his final year. Writing in the 1930s, he saddled Bourne with the responsibility of “shaping the dangerously a-political sensibilities of intellectuals in the twenties,” a remarkable claim, given the more likely causes of the withdrawal of intellectuals from politics after the war, including the red scare, a postwar disillusionment, and the relative lack of support in America for its artists and writers. Nevertheless, it is an interpretation shared by others, even the people who knew Bourne, often substantiated by pointing to the fact that he never wrote about the war after the closing of the Seven Arts and that the
single piece of political theory he did write, the fragment on the state, was discarded in the trash in his room, its writing broken off in mid-sentence. His friends and literary executors, moreover, tried to recast him as a cultural critic rather than as a political radical. Van Wyck Brooks, for instance, his friend and the author of *The Wine of the Puritans*, who repeatedly urged Bourne to remain silent on the war, recounted how he had anticipated Bourne’s full flowering into one of the nation’s foremost literary critics who would help to heal the split between the “highbrow” and “lowbrow” that he, Brooks, found to be severing America’s cultural identity.  

Historians have similarly discounted Bourne’s politics or concluded that he abandoned all interest in politics after the *Seven Arts* closed. They have argued along one of two lines. One group has maintained that Bourne became disenchanted with politics because it was inseparable from war, and having renounced the war, he renounced all political involvement and turned to art as the only salvation for the regeneration of American society. The other has suggested that because Bourne was ultimately ineffective either in stopping the war or in shaping liberal politics in general, his contribution to American politics was, in the final analysis, negligible.

Charles Forcey, in his influential study of the wartime debates among *New Republic* liberals, belongs in the first group in concluding that Bourne “rejected politics in favor of the delights of artistic anarchism” and offered no “practical alternatives” to the support of American participation in World War I. Paul Bourke’s thesis, as well, found Brooks’s political passivity to have influenced Bourne so substantially that “the effect was to produce in him an almost total repudiation of politics altogether.” In Bourke’s reading, the antiwar essays published in the *Seven Arts* constitute “a sustained polemic against political involvement of any kind,” and the unfinished manuscript, “The State,” made “it clear that the enemy had become, simply politics.”

The important study by Christopher Lasch, in contrast, belongs with the second group of historians in arguing that the “new radicals” of Bourne’s generation had consistently confused politics and culture, proposing “political solutions for cultural problems and cultural solutions for political problems.” This confusion made them ineffective politically, and ultimately, insignificant as political radicals,
unable to shape state policies to radical ends. Casey Blake’s assessment of Bourne’s political thought followed from this Laschean perspective, concluding that Bourne’s search for “beloved community” was, in the end, insufficiently civic-minded and inclined toward the romantic. With Blake’s study, the historical judgment has come full circle in recapitulating Mumford’s disappointment with Bourne’s politics as “romantic defeatism.”

These are significant criticisms, and any assessment of the importance of his political thought in the history of American dissent depends on a serious consideration of them. I analyze Bourne’s literary and cultural criticism, and his theory of the roles of the artist and the cultural critic in modern society, in light of these criticisms. Specifically, I address the claim that Bourne’s turn to cultural issues signaled a retreat from political engagement and argue for an alternative reading, that his cultural criticism was an intrinsic part of his political theory. My argument requires looking at Bourne as a particular kind of political theorist, one whose subject was frequently political but whose analyses often were not. (More often, in fact, his subject was culture.) An interest in culture does not in itself signify a diminution of political commitment if, as Bourne believed, cultural solutions could stimulate political responses. His attention to culture, therefore, makes sense immanently as a political critique.

I also address the related and perhaps more important claim that the kind of cultural politics he did advance—namely the production of art, literature, and theater by small cooperatives, literary clubs, and theater collectives—ran the risk of exclusivity and insularity, compromising the democratic ideals to which he was committed. I suggest that his cultural materialism and his theory of the function of art underlay his support of these groups and that he turned to them as a form of prefigurative politics, as exercises in social democracy, reorganizing already existing social relations. Moreover, he believed the art and literature produced in the new cooperatives were more democratic than either the works created by the individual artist, supported by bourgeois patronage, or the products of mass culture because the former were produced collaboratively and were available to all classes, and they rejected the division between the highbrow and lowbrow. Further, he repudi-
ated the antidemocratic implications of the idea of cultural leadership, suggested by Brooks, political leadership as a notion that was too close to vanguardism. Ultimately, I argue that the art he most admired—group art, pageantry, imagist poetry, the novels of Dreiser and Dostoyevsky—can be seen to illustrate his democratic commitments, expressing the “paganism” of the modern experience, tracing the thread of desire underlying human ambitions, or doing both.

The arguments of Brooks and Mumford, as well as many historians, are based on an implicit assumption that cultural concerns are somehow outside the domain of normal politics, as if culture were a place to which one withdrew when real politics gets too rough. This assumption reflects a bias toward liberal politics as normal politics, insofar as liberalism presumes a sharp division between public and private and leaves the private as distinctly reserved for cultural pursuits and personal (read: unorganized) solutions. The possibility that culture itself may be a locus of politics itself or that cultural criticism may have political significance is not considered because, by definition, they were outside the realm of politics.

Moreover, because liberal politics are largely consensus politics, interested in building coalitions among elites (assuming there is no fundamental cleavage among them over principles or core values), they aim to forge compromises over the minutiae of policy formulation and implementation rather than the formation of the values of a common life. As liberal politics in America has been elite politics, in some fundamental sense, ascribing to itself the tasks of administration, regulation, and social control, they have not been concerned with the construction of communitarian values or attention to personal fulfillment through democratic participation, which it has assumed already exists. Because Bourne rejected liberal politics and its institutional forms, he is considered to have abandoned all politics.

But it was the liberal politics of the New Republic and the Wilson administration that Bourne repudiated, not politics itself. His rejection of politics was based on the view that the “war liberals” had distorted politics, overestimating its importance and using the government to intervene in private activities. With the escalation of the political, the boundary between the public and the private, on
which liberalism depended, collapsed; and politics consumed personal lives, trampled academic freedom, and disfigured cultural meanings. Despite the democratic objectives of many progressives, politics had become an occupation for elites, an increasingly insular form of politics that no longer needed to rely on the consent of the majority but only on its acquiescence. In short, the enemy was not politics but an elite politics that knew no limits.

Bourne explained his position to Brooks, as if anticipating the criticism that he was retreating from politics.

Do we [malcontents] deny that politics has no influence on the everyday personal and social life of a nation? Of course not. What we object to is the calm uncritical attitude toward this relation. Nothing arouses the curiosity of these malcontents more than this question of how political systems, political changes, political manipulations, do affect the civilized life as it goes on around us.  

“The real antithesis” between the liberals and himself, as he put it, was the difference “between interest in expensively exploiting American material life, and interest in creatively enhancing American personal and artistic life.”7 Liberal politics had aspirations to “mastery” that aimed to remake society directly. But political reform had to take account of and preserve the culture it believed itself to be saving.

The conservation of American promise is the present task for this generation of malcontents and aloof men and women. If America has lost its political isolation, it is all the more obligated to retain its spiritual integrity.

Accordingly, he advised against any attitude or activity that minimized the importance of art or literature or culture in general. “This nobly-sounding sense of the futility of art in a world of war may easily infect conscientious minds. And it is against this infection that we must fight.”  

In 1917 he signaled the move he was about to make. “One keeps healthy in wartime not by a series of religious and political conso-
lations that something good is coming out of it all, but by a vigorous assertion of values in which the war has no part."¹⁰ His concern with American culture was an effort to discover and articulate those "values" and "ends" that were unexamined in, or absent from, the political agenda. Therefore he came out for "politics taking its place in the many-sided interests of a modern mind."¹¹

As Carl Resek has suggested, Bourne thought art and politics could be separated "only at each other’s peril,"¹² agreeing with the editors of the Seven Arts that the health of the arts was a public concern. James Oppenheim, in the journal’s opening editorial, announced their philosophy:

> It is our faith and the faith of many, that we are living in the first days of a renascent period, a time which means for America the coming of that national self-consciousness which is the beginning of greatness. In all such epochs the arts cease to be private matters; they become not only the expression of the national life but a means to its enhancement.¹³

As public matters, the arts—including the art of politics—were the appropriate subject for the radical critic. The modern critic had to become aware of and able to discuss the relation of literature and art to the larger social environment. Although the precise relation of art and politics, or for that matter culture and politics, ultimately eluded Bourne, his efforts to examine the products and practices of cultural life, in terms of their aesthetic, social, and political aspects and influences, should be seen as part of a wholesale effort to weld radical politics and radical culture into a coherent theory and practice, or form of life.

Waldo Frank argued that Bourne had achieved that integration, joining through his work "the political and cultural currents of advance." In his cultural criticism, he aimed to link revolutionary politics with an appreciation of experimental art and thus tried to create a new mode of discourse and cultural ideal. His cultural criticism focused on the aspects of social life that nurtured and shaped the writer and broadened the reader’s awareness of the writer’s milieu. Cultural criticism in this sense was an extension of his rebellion against the older generation and its Arnoldian "cult of the best"
and a repudiation of his own generation’s preoccupation with administrative politics. Bourne set for himself as a radical critic the goal of welding a radical politics and cultural criticism into a coherent theory and practice, believing in its democratic potential.\textsuperscript{14}

If Bourne was a formalist on arriving at Columbia University, identifying art with the expression of the spiritual and the ethical, by the time he returned from his European tour five years later, he was a socialist realist, looking to the political impact of art and literature. Whether either philosophy of the role of art in society and the standards for judging it had democratic implications requires an understanding of his reasons for supporting them.

His early aestheticism can be seen in a college essay, “The Suicide of Criticism,” in which he challenged the anti-intellectualism and antirationalism of the “new criticism.” Joel Spingarn, his professor and a noted expert in Renaissance art, maintained that art had nothing to do with morality, only with expression, and must not be interpreted in terms of any other criteria. The new critic must renounce “standards” and ask only “what has the author tried to express, and how has he expressed it?” Bourne’s 1911 critique made a case for the validity of criticism guided by art, and vice versa. To blur the distinctions between art and criticism meant the suicide of each. “Art is purposive; it means control and concentration. For the artist does not strive merely to express himself, but to \textit{make a point.} And this making a point is what we mean by \textit{form.}” Bourne insisted in his essay on the importance of artistic form and on the value of its ethical content. “The attempt to root out the ethical is a deadly blow at the very existence of Art.” Although Spingarn’s expressionism did not strike Bourne as immoral, as it did Paul Elmer More and Irving Babbitt, the “new humanists,” it did seem to be an endorsement of intellectual anarchy and aesthetic romanticism.\textsuperscript{15}

By the time he returned from Europe in 1914, Bourne had abandoned the ethical interpretation of art. There was no single or absolute standard of what was “good” or “best,” as the variety of literary and performing arts in Europe showed that each country defined for itself its own standards and its own canon. He blamed
the new humanism of the genteel critics rather than the expressionism of the new critics for turning art education into “almost a branch of moral education.” Under the influence of Babbitt, More, Paul Shorey, and Stuart Sherman, Americans had learned that “to be cultured has meant to like masterpieces” and to worship the classics.

I am not denying the superlative beauty of what has come to be officially labeled “the best that has been thought and done in the world.” But I do object to its being made the universal norm. For if you educate people in this way, you only really educate those whose tastes run to the classics. You leave the rest of the world floundering in a fog of cant.  

When culture was “reserved for the few,” the majority was left to the culture of commercialism and advertising and the popular novel, and America’s writers and artists went unknown and unsupported. Yet the purpose of an education in art was not only to recover America’s artists or to cultivate popular taste but also to enhance social sensitivity.

The mere callousness with which we confront our ragbag city streets is evidence enough of the futility of the Arnold ideal. To have learned to appreciate a Mantegna and a Japanese print, and Dante and Debussy, and not to have learned nausea at Main Street, means an art education which is not merely worthless but destructive.

The roots were less Platonic than Rousseauian. Bourne’s primary concern was not with the idea that the arts created a false or an illusory reality, which individuals confused with the real world, but with the consequences of the Arnoldian standard. The cultivated person, like Rousseau’s patron of the theater, learned to ignore the misery of the poor as he became civilized, losing his natural empathy (amour de soi) and becoming egoistic and self-regarding (amour propre). Rousseau’s genealogy of the corruption of men anticipated Bourne’s assumptions about the original sociability of humans and the process of separation or individuation, justified
by the bourgeois ethos of individualism. Yet Bourne’s modernism deviated from Rousseau’s return to a premedieval communitarianism in his conviction that the arts could attend to the problems of modern alienation and social misery—not only in the ways in which they were produced but in their effect on consciousness. Therefore, the development of aesthetic taste and the standards to judge it became a political imperative.

Life [is] enriched by a certain . . . sensitiveness to art . . . and the complete lack of it . . . brutalizes the people. So if you can do anything towards spreading that sensitiveness . . . you have a work before you as important as that of the best social reformer. Any general improvement in taste means a demand for a rise in the standard of living, and this rise is the great fulcrum, I am convinced, in social progress. Until people begin really to hate ugliness and poverty and disease, instead of merely pitying the poor and the sick, we shall not have, I fear, any great social advance. 19

The change in Bourne’s thinking about the role of art and the standards for judging it came in part from his encounters with the “social art” of the Continent. In a letter from Europe, he wrote of his enthusiasm for its public arts and city planning. “I am immensely interested in civic art, town planning and kindred movements over here.” Europeans took city planning seriously, considering “cities as communal homes,” unlike the architects who planned American towns, which were dingy and sprawled chaotically, and American cities, where they were “obsessed with the individual building.” European city planners worked with the community and its space holistically to create designs in accordance with people’s needs. 20 Such a possibility was ignored by American architects, who considered architecture as high art and were therefore contemptuous of city planning or the “common humdrum building” of apartment houses and office buildings, preferring to leave them to commercial builders. 21

In “American Use for German Ideals,” an article that provoked a storm of controversy and demands that its author be deported for treason, 22 he praised the bold and exciting architectural styles of the
University of Jena and the Stuttgart Theater, the estimable town planning of the city of Ulm, the municipally built and owned apartment buildings in Munich, the model garbage-disposal plant in Furth, and the garden-city workingmen’s suburb in Lichtenhof, where

everywhere, as in the great ages of creative art, the styles are those in which form grows out of function, so that the work of factories and water-towers and railroad bridges suggests the motives of design. Steel and cement set the lines for wholly novel forms. 23

Architecture was potentially the most democratic of arts, “because of its completely social nature.” It had the ability to shape people’s conceptions of space, productivity, feelings of belonging and intimacy, and freedom. 24 In the culture of the cafe, for instance, private buildings often served as public spaces with multiple purposes, alternative arenas for the life of citizenship, for shared speech, action, and recognition. Here the private sphere could be relied on to draw out the impulse toward a life lived in common. Bourne even believed that architecture could become part of the solution to the problems of homelessness, poverty, and slum life.

It was a romantic conception perhaps that individuals could find the life of “beloved community” in the heart of the city, but it also revealed a modernist, and Nietzschean, romance about the function of art. It suggested that art had a utilitarian or social function as well as an ideological or spiritual one. His cultural modernism combined both theories of the relation of art and society. It acknowledged that art had a direct material application and could be a tool of social reform, and it suggested that the arts could be a source of cultural regeneration by their potential to transform consciousness and reinspire common ideals, such that their ideological value was a prerequisite to the transformation of social arrangements. 25

Bourne’s views were based on the premise that the production of art was a social practice. How the artist produced was as important as what was produced and how it was understood. He took as his subject the artist as creative agent, the choices the artist made in the creative process, and what the text revealed and refracted about the social environment in which the artist produced.
Although he seemed to hold the view that art was created autonomously, the conditions of that autonomy varied, and the texts could give readers clues as to the state of art in the larger social process. In this way, the modern critic could judge art and literature immanently but also in social terms. He saw his own task as a culture critic as that of laying bare the relation between art and society and of making that relation more apprehensible to artists and their audiences.26

This view of art as a collective process, influenced by the conditions of family, community, and work and later developed by E. P. Thompson and Raymond Williams, also attended to the ideological consequences of art. The process of creation influenced not only what was produced but also the consciousness of the producers and their audiences. As an ideational force, it had the potential to politicize them or, at least, to increase their “social sensitivity.” This materialist perspective—in which culture is a practical form of social organization that shapes its ideological effect—explains his support for the artists’ cooperatives, neighborhood theaters, and literary collectives of the early twentieth century. Each of them was involved in a new form of cultural/social production as participants of artistic and critical communities unconnected with, and sometimes opposed to, the state and its cultural/national-patriotic norms. Artists and critics living and working together as members of “self-conscious cultural nuclei,” in contrast to the ways in which art was traditionally produced by individual artists and supported by cultural elites, created new forms of art: group art, pageantry, avant-garde dance, and performance art, shaped by their collective organization. They also produced a

new social consciousness [that] demand[ed] its poetry . . . new gods of a collective humanity . . . [a] new social religion [that] has on the one hand its elevated sentiments of democracy and a restored Christianity, [and] also down in the heart of the people its Pagan side, vague, formless, terrible, the stirrings of an incalculable force.27

The pageantmakers were the “Prosperos of today, conjuring up by their magic all the latent charm and beauty that is among us.”
The democratic implications of this new kind of art were evident in the effect on its audiences. Group pageants and community festivals were modern incarnations of dionysian feasts and rites responding to the “elemental cravings” of moderns and, according to Bourne, satisfying the “social hunger” for community. Although group art did not guarantee great art—the Washington Square Players disappointed him because they lacked discipline and a sense of the dramatic—the artists invoked a new “social purpose,” which meant “work[ing] towards a creative, imaginative and inter-stimulating community life, in which personality and expressiveness shall flourish as they cannot under present institutions.”

Because of their liberating potential, Bourne encouraged every cultural worker to “search out its own group, its own temperamental community of sentiment,” writing for one another and criticizing freely. “We are now to form little pools of workers and appreciators of similar temperaments and tastes.”

The potential insularity of these groups, as has been noted by literary critics and historians, did not go unnoticed in Bourne's cultural criticism. Some groups would be homogeneous ethnically, or in terms of class or nationality. “Each national colony in this country seems to retain its foreign press, its vernacular literatures, its schools, its intellectual and patriotic leaders, a central cultural nucleus.” Other groups would be internationalist and, like the Seven Arts, multiethnic, where, as he wrote of himself, he “breathe[d] a larger air.” He supported them because he thought they would give new Americans an anchor in the tide of commercialism and a defense against the “most rudimentary . . . American culture of the cheap newspaper, the ‘movies,’ the popular song, the ubiquitous automobile.” He also endorsed the groups as alternative forms of social organization and brakes on the ethos of individualism. And he championed them as democratic alternatives to the practice of private patronage, which privileged the individual artist and effectively kept the public from participating in an artistic education.

The standards of the social patron had become the standards for society, and ironically, he found them to have a leveling influence.

“Society,” we say, whether it be in the form of the mob or the cultivated dinner-circle, is the deadly enemy of the literary
artist. Literary promises can be seen visibly fading out in the warm beams of association with the refined and the important. And social glamour was never so dangerous as it is today when it is anxious to be enlightened and liberal. Timidity is still the reigning vice of the American intellect, and the terrorism of “good taste” is yet more deadly to the creation of literary art than is sheer barbarism. The literary artist needs protection from the liberal audience that will accept him though he shock them, but that subtly tame him even while they appreciate.  

The dangers of social patronage seemed to underscore the need for artists and critics to band together, writing for one another, criticizing each other. The new form of mass culture, the motion pictures, contributed to the split between the highbrow and the lowbrow. With the current diet of melodrama in the “movies,” he argued, “we seem to be witnessing a lowbrow snobbery. In a thousand ways it is as tyrannical and arrogant as the other culture of universities and millionaires and museums.” Yet he did not “put the thing down to the low intelligence of a dear deluded public.” Melodrama was officialism’s “movie interpretation of life,” seen in the panicked support for a sanatorium to deal with the tuberculosis crisis or the contest between corrupt city officials and more corrupt supporters. Thus, whether it was the standards of the social patron or of officialdom, the leveling of taste offended his democratic sensibilities. “I don’t know which ought to be more offensive to a true democrat—this [stale culture of the aristocrat] or the cheapness of the current life that so sadly lacks any raciness or characteristic savor.”

Yet, for a social democrat, he advanced a seemingly undemocratic position for judging cultural texts. “All good writing is produced in serene unconsciousness of what Demos desires or demands. It cannot be created at all if the artist worries about what Demos will think of him or do to him.” A truly democratic art was constructed by ignoring the standards imposed by the current social order. “The artist writes for that imagined audience of perfect comprehenders. The critic must judge for that audience too.” It was a position that recapitulated Walt Whitman’s credo, used as the motto of Poetry, the
Chicago-based journal of avant-garde verse: “To have great poets, there must be great audiences too.”

Bourne was ambivalent, however, over the elitist implications of this theory of culture. In “The Artist in Wartime,” he fashioned an imaginary debate over the relation of the artist to the war among three aspects of his own conflicted mind. The protagonists were “Clement,” an aspiring novelist whose worry that literature was an indulgence in a world gone mad with war produced in him an artistic paralysis; “Sebert,” a “flaneur” and sybarite who was able to write because he serenely disregarded the war with the justification that “society [was] a hysterical mob” and could not be saved; and an unnamed narrator, who worried that Clement’s depression made art useless in war and futile to pursue and that Sebert’s dismissal of the war was socially irresponsible, insular, and self-absorbed. Bourne did not resolve the question of the futility of art during war, because, in addition to being conflicted himself, he realized that both positions destroyed art: the first by suicide, the second by becoming an accomplice to the war’s effort. “Suppose all the world agreed with [Sebert]? Would it be safe for anything, even for Sebert himself?” The debate, a modern Rameau’s Nephew, is significant for the insight it lends into Bourne’s divided mind over the autonomy of art and the artistic process. To produce in blissful ignorance of social corruption or malaise was unacceptable; but at the same time, an artistic sensibility must protect itself from a forgiving (uncritical) culture. He concluded that “cultural ‘Modernists’” must learn to write for one another and ignore, for the short term, not only the standards of the social patron but also the sterile debates between the new humanists, who measured all art in terms of the classics, and the new critics, who advocated a subjectivist art-for-art’s-sake appreciation of the “expressiveness” of art.

Far better for the mind that aspired towards “culture” to be told not to conform or worship, but to search out its own group, its temperamental community of sentiment, and there deepen appreciations through sympathetic contact.

He encouraged the formation of these “cultural nuclei,” despite the risks of insularity, because he expected that they would disagree
with one another and thereby police their potential elitism. Disharmony could be expected, even a certain disorder, as was evident in the ongoing debates among the social realists, the modernists, and members of the avant-garde. But such struggles were essential to the vitality of the artistic spirit. “Far better a quarrel among these intensely self-conscious groups than the issues that had filled the *Atlantic* and the *Nation* with their dreary obsolescence.”

As an example, he undertook a friendly dispute with Harriet Monroe, *Poetry*’s editor, in 1918, for her position that art should be judged immanently, or strictly in aesthetic terms.

You can discuss poetry and a poetry movement solely as poetry—as a fine art, shut up in its own world, subject to its own rules and values; or you can examine it in relation to the larger movement of ideas and social movements and the peculiar intellectual and spiritual color of the time. To treat poetry in terms of itself is the surest way to drive it into futility and empty verbalism.

What he meant by “more careful and better oriented criticism,” was a “discussion of a larger scope,” which understood art “as an expression of life . . . separating the false in [the critics’] work from the true, and placing them in relation to a larger intellectual and artistic whole.” It was important for critics to “broaden their imaginative and intellectual horizons.” The call for a new criticism was, in short, a call for self-criticism.

The problem of the literary artist is how to obtain more of this intelligent, pertinent, absolutely contemporaneous criticism, which shall be both severe and encouraging. It will be obtained when the artist himself has turned critic.

Therefore, while maintaining the distinction between the function of art and the function of criticism, he showed a growing appreciation of the need for each cultural worker, the artist and the critic, to learn from the other. The involvement of the audience, not only the literary critics, was important to the realization of the artist’s vision.
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He explicitly rejected Brooks’s call for a “new literary leadership.” Because culture was a collective process, the possession and practice of everyone, all must be involved in its creation and preservation. If critics were to take any part in this social enterprise, they would first need to overcome their own class and cultural backgrounds, which the young intellectuals in their political leadership failed to do. Even if they could, he cautioned that any sort of critical literary leadership should be constructed only as “a pious hope, a youthful insolence,” not as a fact that could be “weighed tangibly.” At most, it could be a “vital myth,” an inspiration, but it “could not point to things done. It could only be a ferment or a goad. You would not expect it to be anything else.” His alternative was the leadership of the class of “malcontents” and “desperate spiritual outlaws,” individuals from all social classes, who were too entangled in America and its “promise” to go into exile and too dissatisfied with things as they were to be apathetic. “The country must be dotted with dissatisfied people who cannot accept any of the guides offered to them.” Their leadership would be more democratic but also more political than the cultural leadership of the critic, who, like Brooks, stayed resolutely out of politics.39

In his own literary criticism, Bourne addressed not only what texts revealed but also what they distorted or concealed. Contradictions between form and content, or contradictory meanings, often disclosed the unconscious tensions in the writer’s sense of himself, the world, or both. The new critic and would-be literary radical had to make those contradictions known to the artist and to his audience and interpret their meaning in social terms. Anticipating Bakhtin’s theory of critical dialogics, Bourne determined that the task of the cultural critic was not to repair the text or to complete the literature but to unveil its contradictions and identify the principle that underlay its conflicted meanings and contradictory elements. As he put it, “The new critic must intervene between public and writer with an insistence on clearer and sharper outlines of appreciation by the one, and the attainment of a richer artistry by the other.”40

In much the same way that the ironist was to heighten contradictions but not resolve them, so the new critic would interpose
himself between the artist and his audience and attempt to render an interpretation that had meaning to the audience in their personal lives. The radical critic, in taking a middle position between the author and the public, interpreted for artists and their audiences the social significance of the creative vision and the multiple meanings in the text itself. It was a role decidedly unlike that of the postmodern critic "against interpretation," in that it involved an active intervention in the interpretation of meaning, according to aesthetic and social standards. His role, decidedly secondary to that of the artist in stimulating the imagination and transforming consciousness, nevertheless was an essential part of the artistic process. As long as the critic was aware of its limitations, criticism could be a vital arbitrator of cultural taste.

Perhaps because Bourne was concerned primarily with literature, he did not question the limitations of art to express the depths of human suffering or its inability to capture the common experience. Later pop artists and painters, perhaps because of the limitations of the media, became self-referential, incorporating common objects into paintings in an effort to depict the culture of materialism. Bourne's sense of the artistic sensibility seemed to admit of the need to be ironically self-referential as one means of capturing what he called the "personal point of view." As he saw it, the work of artists, and poets in particular, brought one closer than any other form of expression to the subjective and primal forces in the human experience, the dionysiac given form through the artist's touch.

Nevertheless, he remained concerned with the importance of form, more so than were the cultural nationalists on the *Seven Arts* (save Brooks), yet not as much as the later *Dial* critics in the 1920s were, though never to the exclusion of the work's social significance. At a minimum, Bourne argued, artists must not sacrifice form for exuberance. The contemporary fashions of art for art's sake (for example, Walter Pater's aestheticism) and art for society's sake (for instance, H. G. Wells's socialism) sacrificed form for effect and did not give art the freedom to grow or experiment. On the other hand, much of Vachel Lindsay's writings, especially the *Congo* and *General Booth*, struck him as "imitative" and "banal." Amy Lowell's "imagist" poetry achieved the right balance. She chose the
form to accord with her “revolutionary tone. . . . Her sound intuition gets the better of her class-feeling even in her attitude towards the war.” In her literary criticism as well, she treated poetry as a significant element of daily life, “neither as a refined dessert to be consumed when the day’s work is done, nor as a private hobby which the business man will deride if he hears about it.”

In an overlooked essay, “A Sociological Poet,” he offered an appreciation of the imagism of Jules Romain and the Belgian poets of the European renaissance of the 1910s. He also indicated of his search for the sources of democratic culture, admiring it for reflecting the “social conscience” of the age and a new sociability that revived the instinctual social consciousness and the sense of being a “collective person” of man’s primitive ancestors. Romain’s poetry “shows the way of that return,” singing the song of “the life of the common soul.” He was “a Whitman industrialized,” a “poet of the crowd” and of “mass-life.”

He admired the work of Dreiser most of all, in Sister Carrie and The Genius, for its unsentimental rejection of Puritan optimism and its “habit of redemption” and for Dreiser’s frank treatment of the themes of power and sex. His raw naturalism, also seen in A Hoosier Holiday, revived Bourne’s faith in American literature. It seemed that only Dreiser understood the “sense of determinism that pervaded all life.” He tried to reach below the “conventional superstructure” to the life force of desire. “One feels that this chaos is not only in the Genius’s soul, but also in the author’s soul, and in America’s soul.”

The attention to the relation between the artist’s spiritual health and the material culture in which the artist lived—suggesting that both were texts to be interpreted—was a frequent theme in Bourne’s literary criticism. The author’s characters could be understood as particular representations of both the modern condition and the author. Yet this tracing of desire cannot be construed as a psychoanalytic interpretation of authorial subjectivity but as a recognition that desire was intertwined with material reality. “A good novelist catches hold of the thread of human desires. Dreiser does this, and that is why his admirers forgive him so many faults.”

Bourne did not dismiss Dreiser’s lack of form, however. He had “the artist’s vision” but none of the “sureness of the artist’s techniques.” His “clumsy” technique, his indistinct style, his resort to a
conventional form, the long, episodic structure of the nineteenth-century novel, and his tedious details, "which are too minute to be even good photography," compromised his artistic skill. Still, Bourne wanted to forgive him because Dreiser tried to "make something artistic out of the chaotic materials that lie around us in American life." His sincerity and straightforwardness counted for a great deal in a culture of melodrama and Victorian sentimentalism.

Earlier American novelists were better at sociology and autobiography because their manner was straightforward, and they made no pretense at fiction. In 1916 he decided that Upton Sinclair's *King Coal*, an attempt to integrate fiction and fact, was the best compromise that had been achieved by an American novelist. Yet he likened sociologic fiction to "a movie transcription of life" or "sociological observation 'filmed.'" Like the popular movie, its characterization was shallow, its plot made one "smile," and it was motivated by a melodramatic urge to get its "message" across. Given its different purposes, he suggested, the standards for judging sociological fiction ought to be different from those for art and literature. "All we say is, Does the novel make visible conditions as they are and as they ought to be speedily altered?" After a fashion, Sinclair had succeeded, but largely because his attempts at drama were so feeble and poorly integrated into the reportage that the reader could easily extract the story without losing any of the drama of the grim conditions of coal-mining camps or the brutal repression of the Colorado coal strike by unorganized miners in 1913–1914.48

On the other hand, Ernest Poole had "erred in attempting art," and H. G. Wells's sociologic novels sacrificed art for effect, the characters exploited in an effort to convey a political point. Zola was the only "master of the sociological novel" Bourne could recommend, because he managed to transmit dispassionately the passions of human relations.

Zola lives because . . . he laboriously painted in every segment of his canvas, documenting sensual impression and confused aspiration, as well as institutional circumstance, so as to produce, through sheer massiveness and breadth, a feeling of personal life.
Similarly, although with a different technique, Dostoyevsky captured “the inner life we know. . . . After reading Crime and Punishment, you are yourself the murderer. For days the odor of guilt follows you around.” Because the twentieth century was attempting to splinter traditional dualisms between “spirit” and “matter,” “intellect” and “instinct,” Dostoyevsky appealed to the modern sensibility, making no distinctions between “the normal and the abnormal, or the sane and the insane.” In shattering conventional dualisms, he brought his readers into the “full warm unity of emotional life.” The reader felt a part of the unfolding drama. “In Dostoevsky’s novels it is not only the author that is immanent. The reader is also absorbed.” Older writers often exploited their subjects, but he did not impugn their motives. “There was no falsification” in the presentation of a neatly dualistic life in the writings of Scott, Balzac, Dickens, Thackeray, and Trollope, because they were writing for an epoch that really had stable “character,” standards, morals, that consistently saw the world in a duality of body and spirit. They were a reflection of a class that really had reticenses, altruisms, and religious codes.

Bourne’s literary criticism accommodated the historical context of the artist’s work. 49 The newer artists that compelled his imagination and inspired his idealism were those writers who, like himself, had shed conventional certainties. Willa Cather, one of the new American artists, understood the new ethical and social landscape and was conscious that her readers were of different classes. In My Antonia, Bourne wrote, Cather did not purport to set down “eternal truths” but gave her readers an “understanding of what these people have to contend with and grope for that goes to the very heart of their lives.” She was “convincing” because her “novel has that serenity of the story that is telling itself, of people who are living through their own spontaneous charm,” in contrast to the “cluttered” prose and “self-conscious” moralisms of William Allen White. 50

In the work of the novelists Bourne admired—Cather, Dreiser, and Twain, among the Americans, and Zola, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Lagerløf, Nexö, Gorky, and Rolland, among the Europeans—he
saw reflected the dionysian undercurrent of human personalities, affecting the readers and drawing them into the work. In terms of technique and stance, the novelists did not condescend, but neither did they insert themselves into the story as a conscious presence. The artists either let the story “tell itself” or kept a serene distance from the material. In either case readers were not aware of the writers’ art or their presence or message. The story breathed in the readers themselves; they became a part of it. In contrast to Brecht’s later theory of critical detachment, Bourne seemed to be suggesting that audiences must become involved in the work itself to have the work live in them in order to recognize themselves in it, or to imagine living the life depicted and understand more fully their place in the social order. It was the critic’s task to bring the audience out of the work again, interpreting its meanings in terms of social conditions.

Bourne worried at times that American writers were unable to present convincingly the struggle of life as experienced by the lower classes, not because they were ignorant of it but because they adopted a patronizing attitude rather than “the delicate art of sympathetic detachment.” In 1916 he had decided that Sinclair’s socialist realism would have to do for Americans until a form could be found “in which the writer not only keeps the faith towards his sociological material, but creates also a drama of personal life.” By 1918 he had changed his mind. “It is not enough that a book should be radical.” For a novel to be great, it had to tell its story artfully, and critics whose judgment did not distinguish between a writer’s ideology and his art, or who judged the latter in terms of the critic’s own political persuasions, were “propagandists,” substituting one “orthodoxy” for another.

Nevertheless, the contradictions in Sinclair’s journalism-cum-literature suggested to Bourne that there was still room for new forms of art in America that responded to the cosmopolitan sensibilities of the best-educated, most culturally heterogeneous public to that time. The difficulty of finding those new forms to capture the “new spirit” he understood to be the result of peculiarly modern problems of man, rootless, drifting, but also threatened by militarist or socially repressive orthodoxies of public and private comportment. The new art would have to address and
confront the competing loyalties of America’s artists and their publics; and with the efforts of a social criticism, those angles and contradictions could be made conscious and socially meaningful.

Writing of himself as “Miro” in “History of a Literary Radical,” one of his last essays, Bourne suggested he had reached a turning point in his cultural education. “Miro had a very real sense of standing at the end of an era.” He had learned to “put literature into its proper place, making all ‘culture’ serve its apprenticeship for him as interpretation of things larger than itself, of the course of individual lives and the great tides of society.” Having undergone a “transvaluation of values,” he no longer believed that art revealed truth or virtue but social life itself and its undercurrents of desire and power. The new art must express what it knew best, namely the social nexus in which it was embedded. “The American has to work to interpret and portray the life he knows.”

In a remarkable anticipation of the debates of the 1980s over opening the canon of Western literature in the universities to literature of Western colonials and other nations, Bourne argued that literature had no national limitations and that in a practical sense it was no longer a question of importing “alien culture in the form of ‘comparative literature’” but of understanding that an internationalist world order had brought into being its own form of art. The call for a new inclusiveness in university studies and in the literary marketplace was meant to challenge the militarization of culture, first put into effect by the War Issues course in 1918 on university campuses (later transmogrified in fall 1919 at Columbia University to a required course, “Contemporary Civilization”). The literature that spoke to him and his generation evoked the common experiences of many people in various countries and had the effect of transfiguring their consciousness, creating in them a sense of solidarity with people of divergent traditions.

Miro found the whole world open to him, in these days, through the enterprise of publishers. He and his friends felt more sympathetic with certain groups in France and Russia than they did with the variegated “prominent authors” of their own land. Winston Churchill as a novelist came to seem more of an alien than Artzybachev.
The new literary radicals were “cultural 'Modernists'” of “classical background”—not “cultural vandals”—who mined the cultural past for writers belonging to a “certain eternal human tradition of abounding vitality and moral freedom”; through them the new radicals “buil[t] out the future.”

As a culture critic and literary radical, Bourne had turned to Nietzsche for inspiration. He believed that art, a combination of the apollonian will to form and the dionysian will to chaos, could mend a culture and reinspire its ideals. Yet he also tried to turn Nietzsche into a democrat, suggesting that the “American tribe of talent” would come from no single class or national culture but from those individuals with a “taste for spiritual adventure, and for sinister imaginative excursions.” The prospects of a democratic cultural revival came appropriately from the margins, in rebellion against social patronage and the mass culture of Main Street.