PART THREE

American Innocence
and Liberal Guilt
American innocence, a theme with a long national and prenational history in the United States, showed up with renewed prominence after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. For many sources, liberal and conservative alike, the attacks marked the “loss” of American innocence, an innocence that, it was thus implied, had existed up to the moment of the first plane’s impact. But American innocence in this context seemed to mean different things to different commentators. For some, what was lost on September 11, 2001, was a supposedly national sense of invulnerability, which had now been proved illusory. Here, American innocence appeared to connote something like physical virginity for the national body, a status or at least a feeling (now lost) of never having been violated by foreign others.

For other commentators, the lost American innocence in question was a widespread absence of knowledge about places and peoples outside of the United States. We had not realized that other people could be so different from us, and so angry at us. For some, American innocence signified more metaphysically as a failure to grasp the nature and malevolent persistence of “evil” as such. The loss of this innocence meant our belated recognition of omnipresent and ubiquitous danger in the world, exacerbated by modern technologies such as cell phones and passenger jets. Our national safety would henceforth require ever-expanding suspicion and vigilance, both inside and outside the United States. Indeed, from now on we would have to be prepared to exert deadly force even before our nation was itself attacked.

In response to the widespread discourse of lost American innocence that followed the September 11th attacks, more than one historically minded writer pointed out that Americans had been widely reported to have lost their innocence after other national traumas as well, from the
Civil War to Pearl Harbor to the assassination of President Kennedy and the Vietnam War. They asked what it meant that American innocence seemed perpetually available for “losing” yet again. Much more controversially, however, certain leftist intellectuals insisted that the September 11th attacks served to emphasize America’s lack of innocence, the nation’s current and historical guilt for pernicious actions around the world. These leftist intellectuals uniformly condemned the terrorist attacks: despite right-wing attempts to imply otherwise, they did not take the extreme point of view represented in my epigraph by the television character Marie Warner, who plots to destroy Los Angeles because of what she sees as her own nation’s irredeemable international guilt (“Nobody is innocent in this country!” she screams). Many leftists nonetheless insisted that Americans could be construed as “innocent” only in their naiveté, whether willful or otherwise, about their own nation’s past and current role in the world. Still, claims about American innocence and virtue continued to function as ideological touchstones in the nation’s mobilization for its so-called “war on terror,” including the invasion of Iraq.

Albeit with larger and more widely visible stakes than usual, post–September 11th back-and-forth exchanges about American innocence and guilt exemplify a dynamic with which leftist intellectuals and academics have become frustratingly familiar. That is, working in diverse registers, we analytically “strike through the mask” (to borrow words from Herman Melville’s Ahab) of American innocence, exposing the ambiguities, ambivalences, and actual history that lie beneath it. In so doing, we help produce varying degrees of liberal guilt for those paying attention—and perhaps most of all for ourselves—only to see a presumption of American innocence emerge unscathed as central to most Americans’ (or at least to most white Americans’) sense of their national identity. The two chapters that conclude Liberal Identity, Literary Pedagogy, and Classic American Realism read novels by Henry James and Edith Wharton in the context of present-day political and cultural discourses of American innocence and American guilt. A critically presentist approach to this fiction, I believe, can help us at least begin to frame possibilities by which the Left might move beyond its repetitive but seemingly futile attempts to dismantle the ideology of American innocence.