When critically examining American exceptionalism of the cold war period, American studies scholars have frequently focused on the anticommunist left. The reasons for this focus now appear rather obvious: cold war liberalism, as articulated by a wide range of writers, intellectuals, and politicians from the late 1940s to the early 1960s, seems to offer the prime example of what Donald Pease has called the “Janus-faced” structure of American exceptionalism: conceived within the coordinates of the liberal worldview, the United States appeared as exceptionally committed to freedom and democracy. In light of what was seen as the expansive will of the totalitarian other, the U.S. appeared as the only hope. The rituals of consent to a set of “American” values that liberals not only enacted but morally coerced simultaneously created the space for the U.S. state to systematically act out imperial violence that grossly contradicted what America purportedly stood for.\footnote{Pease writes, “After analyzing what I called the Janus face of American Exceptionalism, I concluded that the relations between US citizens’ belief in US exceptionalism and the state’s production of exceptions to its core tenets might be best described in psychosocial terms as structures of disavowal. By the state’s exceptions I referred to measures … which violated the anti-imperialist norms that were embedded within the discourse of American exceptionalism. In enabling US citizens to disavow the state’s exceptions that threatened their beliefs, the discourse of exceptionalism regulated US citizens’ responses to historical events” (“Re-thinking” 19). See also his The New American Exceptionalism, particularly 141.}

Recently, scholars have come up with an explanation for how Americans managed to live with the contradictions arising from American exceptionalism’s two faces: the magical resolution was provided by “national security” – a rhetoric and a logic of action which was articulated at the very moment the cold war became an entrenched bipolar world order. Based on the redefinition of aggression as the defense of freedom, “national security” provided a legitimation for state violence and thus made exceptionalism’s two faces appear indistinguishable.

A closer look at postwar liberalism’s theory of security, however, reveals that American exceptionalism did not amount to a seamless and unified system of thought or belief, but was instead marked by contradictions. These contradictions did not primarily inhabit the place that ideology critique appoints to them. Rather than operating beneath the level of intelligibility, coming to the fore merely as symptoms, the contradictions that run through cold war liberalism’s approach to security constitute liberalism’s critical impetus. Indeed, I will show that liberal intellectuals tended to be conflicted about “security” because the concept in its primary denotation stood for an excess of rationality that was seen as a threat to the virtues enshrined in civilization.
Cold war liberalism did not only underwrite the aspirations of American global hegemony as “leader of the free world,” but also articulated a critical theory that was invested in a multifaceted ideal of insecurity that emerged from the aversion to security.

This ideal of insecurity found its full articulation in the liberal theory of aesthetics. Though this theory is now commonly seen as an attempt to depoliticize culture and the public sphere with the effect of entrenching the status quo, in fact postwar liberals’ ruminations on the aesthetic were deeply political, as becomes clear by reading them with an eye to the problem of security and insecurity. For this purpose, I will analyze the formal and informal literary criticism of three very different cold war intellectuals: journalist Whittaker Chambers, who became a founding figure of Christian conservatism but nevertheless shared many of the convictions characteristic of postwar liberalism, literary critic Lionel Trilling, and historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. All three were staunch anticommunists during the 1940s and 1950s, a position Chambers and Trilling took up after renouncing their earlier communist sympathies (Schlesinger is the exception here: born in 1917, he was too young to participate in the full trajectory from 1930s communism to postwar anticommunism); all three emphasized the falseness and danger of the ideal of security; all three turned to the aesthetic realm to explain why an anti-totalitarian society needed an appreciation of insecurity in both the aesthetic and the political realm; and while they all were skeptical of the militarization of society undertaken in the name of “national security,” all three nonetheless harmonized their critique of the ideal of security with American exceptionalism’s claims to global leadership, even if this involved violence.

I am suggesting in this article, then, that a post-exceptionalist perspective on American exceptionalism needs to be able to take seriously exceptionalism’s constitutive contradictions and its internal contestations. What this means is that a post-exceptionalist analysis of American exceptionalism should neither blindly follow the categories devised by exceptionalism, nor exhaust its intellectual energies in the critical debunking of those categories – with the result of ascribing more coherence to them than they ever possessed. In taking up this act of redescription, I also hope to contribute to recent attempts to reassess the tradition of liberalism, not in order to single-mindedly defend it against the critiques leveled at it over the last decades, but to reclaim its critical potentials.²

² Among literary scholars, see for instance, Amanda Anderson, “Character and Ideology;” among intellectual historians, see John McGowan, American Liberalism; among political theorists, see Jan-Werner Müller, “Fear and Freedom.” A common touchstone for recent reconsiderations of liberalism is the work of late political theorist Judith Shklar, particularly her essay “The Liberalism of Fear.”
I. Embracing National Security, Rejecting the Ideal of Security: Liberalism, Realism, Tragedy

During the early years of the cold war, the term security became a buzzword for politicians, intellectuals, and the broad public, and it did so in two contrary ways. It is during the years immediately following World War II that “national security” became an established – and ideologically powerful – phrase. Up to that point, the established terms had been “national interest” and “national defense.” In 1947, the National Security Act and the founding of the National Security Council institutionalized the term (hitherto used occasionally though not self-reflexively). The corresponding discourse demanded priority for national security in all areas of life, and “national security” became the subject of the hour. As one journalist wrote, “it has become impossible to read a newspaper, or leaf through a magazine, or go to a dinner party, without being made sharply aware by a story or an article, or a chance remark, of the widespread interest in the future security of the United States” (qtd. in Neocleous 76–77).

But simultaneously the term “security” was in heavy use in a different sense as well. Here, security was connoted negatively, as an ideal to be rejected. I argue in this article that these two understandings of security did not exist side by side, as homonyms, but rather stood in dialogue with each other, and that this dialogue contributed to the complex of significations that made up American exceptionalism. The sudden prevalence of the notion of security that we find in the phrase “national security” and that seems to have done the ideological work of resolving the contradictions between American idealism and American power politics can therefore be understood only if it is related to security’s other meaning. In this complementary dimension, security stood for an excessive trust in progress and rationality, a political utopianism that had ended up in a kind of dialectic of the Enlightenment. The ideal of security in this sense was seen as harmful because it was an illusion that allowed people to shy away from reality and because it led to catastrophic results once the ideal was put into practice. In the opening pages of The Vital Center (1949), Arthur Schlesinger gave voice to the first of these two aspects: “We must recognize that this is the nature of our age: … security is a foolish dream of old men, [and] crisis will always be with us” (10). Reinhold Niebuhr stressed the second aspect. He argued that the philosophy growing

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3 Mark Neocleous lists a number of earlier occurrences of the term “national security,” among them the National Security League, a nativist organization formed in 1914, and articles on foreign policy by Edward Mead Earle and Walter Lippman from the late 1930s and early 1940s. He concludes that “what is significant is that although the term appears in these [earlier] texts there is little substantive analysis of what it is or might mean” (Critique 209n2).

4 On this point, see Neocleous: “The most forceful advocate of the concept, Navy Secretary James Forrestal, commented that ‘national security’ can only be secured with a broad and comprehensive front, and made a point of adding that ‘I am using the word security here consistently and continuously rather than defense… ‘I like your words national security,’ one Senator commented” (Critique 76).
out of the Enlightenment, “intent ... upon eliminating the natural hazards to comfort, security and contentment,” created “the ironic situation that the same technical efficiency which provided our comforts has also placed us at the center of the tragic developments in world events” (Irony 43, 45).

Schlesinger, Niebuhr, and their fellow anticommunist intellectuals consequently began to call for a repudiation of the ideal of security. They associated their critical stance variously with political, moral, and theological “realism.” Rarely defined precisely, these variants of realism shared the conviction that evil was ineradicable, that human nature was prone to weakness when tempted by vanity and power, and that plans to engineer a future free of conflict and hardship would run up against the stubborn facts of the human condition. As Richard Pells writes in his classic intellectual history of postwar liberalism, “Niebuhr, Schlesinger, and Trilling all [argued that both liberal progressives and socialists] overlooked the extent to which people were unmanageable and unpredictable, and both assumed that society could be made to conform to some preconceived plan or ideal. Such innocence about history and human nature no longer seemed charming to the postwar intellectuals; they preferred a political philosophy that was sensitive to the illogical and accidental elements in social life” (Pells 137). For the individual, this meant that one had to face the messiness of all action, its necessary implicatedness in that which the action was designed to oppose. Essentially, the realist view emphasized the tragic character of the modern condition: morally forced to act in a world full of evil, the individual couldn’t help becoming evil’s helper, at least to some degree.5

5 Pells emphasizes the crucial role Hannah Arendt played in anticommunist intellectual circles. Not only was she a frequent contributor to Partisan Review, but her Origins of Totalitarianism became a key text in defining a politico-philosophical position of anti-totalitarianism. In particular, Arendt emphasized totalitarianism’s (and by implication: security’s) problematic aspiration of expunging the contingency of the future. In Pells’s summary: “If American and Europeans did not appreciate the virtues inherent in these venerable political doctrines [of rights, proceduralism, and civic engagement], [Arendt] feared, the totalitarians would make good their promise to reorganize their world. Against those who called themselves the sovereigns of the future, she hurled the accumulated wisdom of the past” (94). It is difficult to find an explicit rendition of this view in Origins, but the following passage shows how she creates an irresolvable conflict between “human dignity” – which she grounds in part in human creativity – and planning the future: “For respect for human dignity implies the recognition of my fellow-men or our fellow-nations as subjects, as builders of worlds or co-builders of a common world. No ideology which aims at the explanation of all historical events of the past and at mapping out the course of all events of the future can bear the unpredictability which springs from the fact that men are creative, that they can bring forward something so new that nobody ever foresaw it” (Origins 458).

6 Amanda Anderson has recently emphasized the degree to which mid-century liberalism adopted a moderately pessimistic outlook on life and thus articulated a sharp divergence from eighteenth-century liberalism that was organized around characterizations such as ‘optimistic’ and ‘blissfully progressive.’ Like myself, Anderson sees liberalism’s turn toward the skeptical as a political critique that should not be hastily brushed aside by the notion that liberalism disavowed its own investment in power struggles: “Liberalism in this twentieth-century form is thus
Realism thus served as the antithesis to what anticommunist writers interpreted as an inhumane, mechanical, thoroughly rational, and mistakenly optimistic worldview. While they interpreted this worldview as characteristic of the international communist left of the 1930s and the emerging communist bloc of the post-war years, it is important to understand that the early cold war intellectuals did not simply engage in a strategy of *othering* – a kind of Schmittian politicization emerging from the distinction between friend and enemy, as a result of which the Soviet Union would have appeared as the evil foe. This is precisely because their threat construction was more abstract and theoretical, drawing on critical theories of modernity. Since, in their minds, the gravest threat to civilization arose from a philosophical outlook that overvalued instrumental reason and understood the world as raw material to be shaped according to human designs of order, danger lurked everywhere, at least theoretically: the communist bloc, the United States, the entire West were at risk, since the reign of radical rationality seemed to be spreading everywhere. Indeed, on one level the anticommunist critique of the ideal of security ran counter to any easy distinction between “us” and “them,” considering that it was to a large degree a self-critique: after all, nearly all postwar anticommunists had been affiliated with the communist left only a few years earlier, either as party members or fellow travelers.

If it is true that cold war liberals became supportive of domestic and foreign policies of national security only against the background of rejecting the ideal of security-as-rationality in a self-critical maneuver, we must also revise the dominant explanation of the triumph of “national security.” For in this dominant view, security gains political cachet precisely because it helps draw and foster the boundary between inside and outside, friend and enemy. To be sure, cold war discourse can be seen as the attempt to transpose internal divisions and conflicts into a binary identity-logic of us-versus-them, and in that sense cold war liberals exacerbated the rigidity of cold war anticommunism. But at the center of cold war liberalism we nonetheless find deeply rooted resonances of a post-Romanticist critique of the Enlightenment. And this critique located the object to be criticized in the history of the West, and thus made the problems represented by communism not a property of “them” but of “us.”

As I noted above, security, however, was not merely seen as the major source of threat; security was also seen as an unavoidable concern around which the response to the threat had to be organized. In a sense, the cold war project of anticommunist intellectuals could be captured by the slogan “Security From Security.” This phrase is less paradoxical than it sounds, for it combines two different concepts of security. However, only one of them precisely a rejection of the progressive optimism that was seen to mark nineteenth-century liberalism and its heir, twentieth-century radicalism. In this sense, a certain noncommunist liberalism aims to preserve the democratic project against considerable dangers as manifested on both the right and the left” (“Character and Ideology” 217). See also Anderson’s “The Liberal Aesthetic.”

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7 This line of thought finds expression, for instance, in the works of Dillon and Campbell.
absolute rationality – can be clearly defined. The competing notion of security, which would inform the cold war intellectuals’ stance toward policies of national security and the infrastructure of the national security state, remained more elusive because it rested on an unstable balance: it had to find ways of actively confronting threat without, in doing so, succumbing to the same radical rationality that posed the threat in the first place.

Harking back to the romantic critique of modernity, and articulating revisionist versions of liberalism that widened liberalism’s narrow base in the Enlightenment (what Nancy Rosenblum has called “Another Liberalism”), anticommunist writers and thinkers frequently turned to the aesthetic— and particularly to literature—in order to find an effective response to the threat emerging from security-as-rationality. In the views of Whittaker Chambers, Lionel Trilling, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., whose dual conceptions of security I will explore in the following pages, literature provided insights, applicable to the political world, in how to face a world dependent on human action yet recalcitrant to human planning. In Michael Kimmage’s succinct phrase, “tragedy was a gift that art could give to politics” (164).

This turn to the tragic could take an immanent or a transcendent turn. In the immanent version (seen in Trilling and Schlesinger), fiction demonstrated the necessary failure of grand political projects, from revolution to utopian communities. In the transcendental version (Chambers), literature demonstrated the failure of human design and brought to awareness the primacy of God’s order. In both cases, the aesthetic provided a domain in which to experience the limits of the human capacity to order the world and plan the future—and thus brought home a realist view of things.

When it came to literature, however, the commitment to “realism” didn’t translate into the period-style of the same name: the literature these thinkers favored could be romantic, realist (though decidedly not social-realist), or modernist. What mattered was that it did not openly endorse a particular political ideology, nor aim to push an agenda, but insisted on the discontinuity between the realms of politics and culture without thereby rendering culture apolitical. Aesthetically, this meant that literature was not to submit to the social realism dogmatically favored by the Communist Party. When Partisan Review, in 1937, severed its ties to the Communist Party and re-appeared as an independent publication with an aesthetic orientation toward what might be described as “moderate modernism,” the “Editorial Statement” of the re-launch issue declared, “Formerly associated with the Communist Party, Partisan Review strove from the first against its drive to equate the interests of literature with those of factional politics. Our reappearance on an independent basis suggests our conviction that the totalitarian trend is inherent in that movement and that it can no longer be combated from within” (“Editorial Statement” 3). But evading the totalitarian tendencies of the Communist Party by granting independence to the interests of literature and politics turned out to be more difficult than it seemed. In fact, independence here meant basing literature and politics on the same set of liberal principles. As Amanda Anderson remarks, “the terms that were advanced to deepen the
political debate on the left – pessimism, tragedy, irony, paradox, ambiguity, and complexity – were also the aesthetic terms valorized by those on the literary left, and coincide with the aesthetic values of modernism” (“Character and Ideology” 220), though it should be emphasized, again, that Trilling, Schlesinger, and Chambers found these “modernist” aesthetic values in nineteenth-century fiction as much as in modernist writing.

If realism was a touchstone for both liberal and conservative anticommunists in their struggle against the utopian belief in security, it is also what propelled the embrace of security as it appeared in the phrase “national security.” In such influential government communiqués as George Kennan’s “Long Telegram,” cabled from Moscow in February 1946, the Clifford-Elsey Report of the same year, and Kennan’s X-article published in Foreign Affairs in 1947 – all of which were instrumental in establishing the reign of national security – political realism seemed the only possible stance toward the Soviet Union. Since Soviet leaders were perceived as unwilling or unable to work toward a settlement, the aim of ever achieving stable peace became denigrated as unrealistic. Therefore, rather than serving as a synonym of peace, national security became associated with the anti-isolationist and anti-utopian position of engaging in the world in order to defend freedom against totalitarian forces. Though defense at times lost its primary connotation of passivity or reaction and instead became associated with a pro-active stance that aimed to be one step ahead of the totalitarian enemy, national security was nonetheless differentiated from the imposition of order. That the “defense of freedom” was inevitably beset by contradictions and required acts of violent aggression impossible to square with the values of Western democracy was what, in the eyes of cold war thinkers, made national security a tragic – and for that matter all the more humane – affair. To put it differently, national security was seen as a defense strategy of freedom that was necessarily bedeviled by the hazards of chance and inconsistency, and for that very reason appeared as an antidote to, and triumph over, the rationalist ideal of security.

II. Whittaker Chambers and the “Will to Security”

Most anticommunist intellectuals had aligned themselves with communism during the early 1930s, either as party members or fellow travelers, and had eventually experienced their moment of disillusion (their “Kronstadt,” as it was frequently called in reference to Lenin’s violent suppression of the 1921 rebellion in the naval fortress Kronstadt).8 Once they had turned against their former political conviction, literature could become a vital weapon in the fight against communism. Anticommmunist intellectuals insisted on the irreducibility of art to politics, but the capacity of art to make clear this

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8 For an account of the significance of the Kronstadt for anticommunists, see Louis Fischer’s introduction to The God that Failed (edited by Richard Crossman), a 1949 collection of “Kronstads,” among them Richard Wright’s and Arthur Koestler’s; see also Michael Kimmage, The Conservative Turn, chapter 3 (78–108).
distinction was itself seen as the most political function of art. For Chambers, Trilling, and Schlesinger, literature became the domain of insecurity, and insecurity encompassed both an aesthetics of the uncertain, and a politics averse to non-dialectical rationality. In the remainder of this article, I will detail how Chambers, Trilling, and Schlesinger each articulated a cultural critique of security by engaging nineteenth-century fiction. I will begin with Whittaker Chambers, who in my “liberal” trio acts as the odd man out: anti-progressive, pessimistic, and nearly zealously religious, his conservatism seems to set him apart from the tradition of liberalism altogether. Yet considering that postwar liberalism defined itself predominantly against the progressivism of the 1930s, it might be more accurate to say that Chambers simply went furthest in repudiating his former allegiances. Beginning my discussion with Chambers means beginning with the limit case of cold war liberalism. I turn to Chambers not because I see in him a resource for re-claiming the critical potentials of cold war liberalism, but because I wish to signal right away that key features of postwar liberal thought, which in the case of Trilling and Schlesinger warrant renewed attention, were compatible with the conservative antmodernism of a Whittaker Chambers. Revisiting cold war liberalism, in other words, is historically incomplete without taking the conservative variant into consideration. This is all the more the case since anticommunist liberals like Trilling and Schlesinger themselves would eventually have an impact on neoconservatism at least as much as they would on the left.

Chambers’s autobiography Witness (1952) quickly became a manifesto of postwar conservatism, a status which the book has kept to the present day. From a literary perspective it presents a confessional conversion narrative in which the protagonist details his fall – he becomes attracted to communism out of personal and existential despair and soon becomes an underground agent for the party – and his ensuing conversion back to a faith devoted as much to Christianity as to an anticommunist United States. The confessional mode not only offered an intelligible moral framework for Chambers’s life story but also came with immediate political benefits: it conveniently legitimized informing on other members of what was presented as a communist conspiracy (the elevation of informing to a moral virtue would soon be picked up in Elia Kazan’s On the Waterfront, released in 1954). Moreover, the book served as a justification of Chambers’s testimony in the Alger Hiss case, which became necessary because the two Hiss trials of 1948 and 1950 were unable to settle the debate about Hiss’s role as a communist spy and thus about the truth of Chambers’s allegations. But most of all, the conversion formula allowed Chambers to give meaning to his life by elevating his experiences to the existential struggle of Western civilization in light of vital threats stemming from communism, which was itself presented as the radicalization of Western rationalism. Michael Kimmage astutely comments that “Chambers’s highest ambition for Witness was to weave his life story into the history of Western culture. In this ambition, his three models were Augustine, George Fox, and Henry Adams. Christianity united these three
figures, who were otherwise far apart in historical moment and sensibility. They were Christian writers who wrote about themselves in part to confess their own sins and the sins of those around them” (216).

Chambers drew on a familiar repertoire of topoi to articulate his conservative reaction to Enlightenment rationalism and the resulting danger and appeal of communism. The first of these resources was pastoralism. From the very beginning of the introductory chapter – the “Foreword in the Form of a Letter to My Children” – Chambers situates his confession in nature, far away from the corruption of the city: “Beloved Children, I am sitting in the kitchen of the little house at Medfield, our second farm which is cut off by the ridge and a quarter-mile across the fields from our home place, where you are” (3). But Chambers’s pastoralism is never entirely credible. Though lacking the suave urbanity of the New York intellectuals, Chambers was too cosmopolitan, polyglot, and intellectual to be a convincing yeoman farmer. Chambers, however, attempted to reconcile nature with culture, mediating them by way of religion. Both expressed the sanctity of creation and demanded “reverence and awe for life and the world, which is the ultimate meaning of Beethoven and Shakespeare” (19).

Clearly, Whittaker Chambers was a man of letters, and he used his autobiography to fashion himself that way. He relates how he read his way through his grandfather’s library as a boy; later, he absorbed the “Great Books” education at Columbia. From his college days on, he moreover was an occasional writer of literature himself, at one point with considerable success: in 1932, shortly before he became an agent in the underground of the Communist Party, he published four proletarian short stories in the New Masses, which gained him much praise from the communist literary left, and an editorial post at the New Masses. It is not surprising, then, that Chambers looked to literature to support his critique of security along the lines of the Christian tradition – a tradition that, since Augustine, had identified the feeling of being secure as a lack of humility in the face of human limitation and God’s infinite and inscrutable will, and that insisted on defining true security as resting with God.

In Witness, Chambers singles out Victor Hugo’s Les Misérables (1862) as the literary work ideally capable of battling against the Enlightenment mindset of godless rationalism by returning the reader to a Christian ethics of

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9 In a sense, his pastoralism is reminiscent of George Kennan’s, who claimed that his weekend farm life was the best training for his work as a policy strategist, and who referred to his farm – one imagines with a sense of ironic relish – by the name of the little Pennsylvania town on whose outskirts it was located: “East Berlin” (see John Lewis Gaddis, George F. Kennan 157).


11 For Augustine, “securitas” denoted the antithesis of the proper fear of God, and usually referred to a mistaken assurance of salvation (see Schrimm-Heins I:137). On this view, a sense of danger in this world fulfills a crucial task for remaining appropriately fearful of God. In John Hamilton’s summary, “Augustine … claims that to be utterly secure in this world would threaten true security with God. It would deceive us with a resting point, when the only valid resting point should be in the light of God’s grace” (63).
humility. Here, as throughout *Witness*, Chambers’s own experiences are burdened with providing the immediate proof of his argument, and thus turn his own experience into a representative case: “In [the novel’s] pages can be found the play of forces that carried me into the Communist Party, and in the same pages can be found the play of forces that carried me out of the Communist Party” (*Witness* 134). Chambers defined the “communist vision” as a “vision of Man without God,” which challenged man “to prove [the vision] by reducing the meaningless chaos of nature, by imposing on it his rational will to order, abundance, security, peace” (10). Rejecting the progressive optimism exemplified by the communist vision, Chambers declared the rational will to security (and to order, abundance, and peace) itself a threat, and supported his argument by pointing to the atomic arms race: “If man’s mind is unequal to the problems of man’s progress, … he will sink back into savagery (the A and the H bombs have raised the issue in explosive forms)” (10). While his role in the Alger Hiss case aligned him with the anticommunist fear-mongers who were instrumental for the spread of the ideology of “national security” (a phrase which does not appear once in *Witness*), by implication his critique of the will to security also rejected the craze for national security, which was after all the context in which the H bomb was developed, supposedly allowing the United States to remain on top in the struggle for the maximum power of deterrence. For Chambers, the conservative Christian, scientific progress outran the capacities of the human mind, and the military build-up of the cold war, commonly justified by the necessities of national security, only proved the point. In his autobiographical reconstruction, it was *Les Misérables* that led him to this insight:

[Hugo’s novel] taught me two seemingly irreconcilable things – Christianity and revolution.

It taught me first of all that the basic virtue of life is humility, that before humility, ambition, arrogance, pride and power are seen for what they are, the stigmata of littleness, the betrayal by the mind of the soul, a betrayal which continually fails against a humility that is authentic and consistent. It taught me justice and compassion, not a justice of the law, or, as we say, human justice, but a justice that transcends human justice whenever humanity transcends itself to reach that summit where justice and compassion are one. It taught me that, in a world of force, the least act of humility and compassion requires the utmost exertion of all the powers of mind and soul, that nothing is so difficult, that there can be no true humility and no true compassion where there is no courage. That was the gist of its Christian teaching. (134)

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12 Kimmage remarks that Chambers’s radical conservatism threatened to put him at cross purposes with fighting the cold war. Pointing to the last chapter of *Witness*, in which Chambers turns to the uncertain future of Western civilization, Kimmage argues that ultimately the need of winning the cold war led Chambers to subdue his conservative resistance to the security-program of military build-up: “Chambers’s hostility to all things middle class, capitalist, and modern militated against the basic constituents of America’s geopolitical power, against capitalism and technology. As a consequence, Chambers’s conservatism demanded compromise at best and self-contradiction at worst. Chambers was able to compromise because his priorities were very clear. The Cold War had to be won at all costs and no antimodern dreams were to get in the way” (226).
Humility, however, is only one of the two lessons Chambers attributes to Hugo’s social epic, the other being revolution. Significantly, the concept of revolution Chambers reconstructed from reading Les Misérables gained its appeal from its distance to the Marxist (modern) notion of revolution. As we will see, Lionel Trilling, too, singled out a literary work as the quintessential anticommunist weapon in which revolution could be wrested from communism. What both Chambers and Trilling sought was an essentially romantic attitude toward social upheaval in which an inner voice of morality asserted itself against the injustice of the social order, without believing that injustice could be undone by the installment of a different order. Here is Chambers on the novel’s lesson on revolution:

[Les Misérables] taught me revolution, not as others were to teach me – as political or historical fact – but as a reflex of human suffering and desperation, a perpetual insurgence of that instinct for justice and truth that lay within the human soul, from which a new vision of truth and justice was continually issuing to meet the new needs of the soul in new ages of the world. (135)

For Chambers, then, the two teachings of Hugo’s work – humility and revolution – are essentially indistinguishable: they resurrect an awareness of a feeling for transcendent justice, a feeling that “requires the utmost exertion of all the powers of mind and soul,” while also elevating the intuitions of the soul over the calculating operations of the mind. Humility and revolution are two facets of an attitude that distrusts the self-aggrandizement of rational calculation by courageously standing up for the passions of justice. But humility also continuously checks the “instinct for justice and truth,” shielding it from the danger of turning into a fanaticism of its own. This was particularly urgent because Chambers’s critique of communism did not merely warn of Enlightenment rationalism taken to its cruel conclusion. He also described communism as a kind of romantic revolution that became difficult to resist because it afforded the only chance for heroic action: “I was willing to accept Communism in whatever terms it presented itself … For it offered me what nothing else in the dying world had power to offer at the same intensity – faith and a vision, something for which to live and something for which to die” (196). But without faith in God, such an Ersatzreligion could only end in the horror of actively promoting totalitarian creeds like communism: “[O]ut of my weakness and folly (but also out of my strength), I committed the characteristic crimes of my century” (449).

If Witness is part conversion narrative, part conservative manifesto, it is certainly not a work of literary or cultural criticism. Hence Chambers provided no explicit theoretical explanation for the power of literature to make people turn away from the rational will to security. However, we do find implied suggestions for this capacity, and they help us see how Chambers weaves together religion, aesthetics, and morality in order to articulate an alternative sensibility to cold-blooded rationality. His reconstruction of his first reading experience of Les Misérables at the age of “eight or nine” (133) is revealing in this regard: “When I read those lines [on the novel’s first page], there moved through my mind a solemn music that is the overtone of justice.
and compassion. A spirit moved upon the page and through my ignorance I sensed that spirit” (134). Chambers’s vocabulary is unmistakably religious, but his metaphors also suggest that the novel’s spiritual power derives from its aesthetic nature. In fact, the imagery of “solemn music” and “overtones” indicates that the instinct of justice can be experienced only aesthetically, and that the teachings of literature amount to an education sentimentale, in which aesthetically induced feeling is prioritized over the will.

For Chambers, however, what Hugo had to offer was more specific than the romantic opposition of sentiment (religious in nature, and located in the realm of aesthetic experience) to rational will. He also implied that the “teachings” of fiction result from the capacity of the novel’s characters to act as models of morality. In particular, he singled out the Bishop of Digne (Muriel), whose gentleness and selflessness helps the protagonist Valjean regain his belief in humanity and reenter society. Rather than reading the Bishop as a martyr whose suffering propelled historical progress in a Hegelian manner, Chambers interprets the “upright man” (as Hugo calls the Bishop in the heading of the first chapter) as a hero who is free of self-righteous hubris and who, an anticommunist intellectual avant la lettre, harbors no utopian hopes for the rational improvement of society. Neglecting the novel’s repeated insistence that human misery can only be solved by changing the social structure, and denying the continuities between Proudhon’s utopian socialism (which directly influenced Hugo’s novel) on the one hand, and Marxist thought on the other, Chambers explicitly positions Hugo’s character against Marx and Lenin. Here is Hugo’s description of the Bishop as cited by Chambers, and the analogy Chambers draws to himself:

“He inclined toward the distressed and the repentant. The universe appeared to him like a vast disease; he perceived fever everywhere; he auscultated suffering everywhere. And without trying to solve the enigma, he sought to staunch the wound. The formidable spectacle of created things developed a tenderness in him....”

My life failed at the moment when I began to try to “solve the enigma” and “staunch the wound,” for Marx and Lenin did little more for me than give me a modern diagnosis and a clinical ways and means to deal with that “vast disease” which the Bishop of Digne felt and that “social damnation” which his author first made me conscious of. Even as a Communist, I never quite escaped the Bishop. I put him out of my mind, but I could not put him out of my life. (137)

13 Richard Lehan aligns Hugo’s philosophy of history with that of Hegel’s, and thus, indirectly (though, as it were, upside down), with Marx’s: “Hugo felt that his story of Jean Valjean, Javert, and Marius was inseparable from that historical process, that the contradictions which would cancel the lives of both Valjean and Javert were the contradictions of history, and that the spirit of a higher will was working through Marius, a spirit that would redeem Paris, both as the capital of France and as the container of the poor. Hegel could not have expressed it any better” (Lehan 55).

14 Chambers quotes Isabel F. Hapgood’s translation, commonly used since the first American edition from 1887. For a widely available edition using this translation, see the Signet Classics edition (New York: Penguin, 1987). The citation can be found on p. 57.
Cold War Liberalism and the Problem of Security

Chambers stresses the religious components of Hugo’s romantic realism in order to drive a wedge between Marx’s and Lenin’s secular rationalism – driven by a will to security – and a sense of social justice that retains an acuteness to divine mystery and the futility of human efforts to not merely staunch the wounds of the social world but prevent future injuries, as it were. In Chambers’s account, his own life lived according to the “communist vision” was doomed to failure. Luckily, the novel’s capacity to sound “the overtone of justice and compassion” could not be suppressed forever, and ultimately saved him from the moral deafness produced by the will to security. The afterglow of his religio-aesthetic experience of *Les Misérables* early in his life smoldered inside him during his phase of moral disorientation, and thus served as the foundation of his conversion.

III. Lionel Trilling: The Adventure of Insecurity

Lionel Trilling shared neither Chambers’s conservatism, religious outlook, nor penchant for pathos. A conversion narrative like *Witness* must have appeared as hopelessly crude and embarrassing to Trilling. Nonetheless, Trilling’s commitment to a liberalism steeped in a tragic worldview overlapped with Chambers’s position in several regards: he rejected the optimism of Enlightenment rationalism and desired from literature a lesson in what he called “moral realism:” an awareness of the corrupting influence civilization has on all of us (in Chambers’s Christian variant, this idea was simply the “problem of evil”). To Trilling, great literature could only be produced by artists who contained, as he phrased it in his essay “Reality in America,” “a large part of the dialectic [of their times] within themselves, their meaning and power lying in their contradictions” (*Obligation* 76).

Literature, as the realm of contradictions, was impossible to square with the stark rationality underlying cold war intellectual’s construction of the ideal of security. But Trilling took this belief a step further than Chambers. For Trilling, literature was essentially about insecurity. Not only did it stand up against the belief that humans could rationally access moral truths with certainty, or that they could translate moral insight into the perfect social order. Literature, Trilling argued in “On the Teaching of Modern Literature,” was itself a force of disorder which had to be described in the most physical of terms: “structures of words [literary writers] may indeed have created, but these structures were not pyramids or triumphal arches, they were manifestly contrived to be not static and commemorative but mobile and aggressive, and one does not describe a quinquereme or a howitzer or a tank without estimating how much damage it can do” (388). The damage great literature

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15 I am quoting from *The Moral Obligation to be Intelligent*, edited by Leon Wieseltier, which collects a large number of Trilling’s essays in their original magazine versions, before they were edited for his various books of essays.
could do was directed against the civilized order from which it emerged. Literature was a counteragent to the tendencies of modern society to ossify, to restrict individual freedom in its desire for order.

Literature – and, to some degree, the arts in general – possessed this force in ways that social movements could not. Thus, Trilling’s theory was built on the belief that literature, and culture in general, could be genuinely adversarial. But when he used the term “adversary culture” (which he made popular in the 1960s – particularly in the preface to Beyond Culture, from 1965 – but which had been gestating in his writings for some forty years), he intended it to be understood ironically, which, ultimately, meant dialectically. Once the adversarial stance had become a culture of its own, it degraded into another bourgeois, conformist, and spiritually dead phenomenon – what Trilling, in Beyond Culture, called a new “class” – that mistakenly continued to believe in its own anti-bourgeois mythology. Trilling declared this type of a hegemonic absorption of dissent to have diluted culture’s power to disrupt the political stasis effected by the middle class. In the preface to Beyond Culture he wrote, “The change has come about, we may say, through the efforts of the adversary culture itself. It has not dominated the whole of its old antagonist, the middle class, but it has detached a considerable force from the main body of the enemy and has captured its allegiance” (554).

Culture, in other words, had the potential to be adversarial, but an adversary culture did not. Therefore literature could be deeply political, but only if one was ready to grant that politics ultimately stood in the service of the freedom of the individual, and had to do its work on the level of individual experience. In 1965, Trilling reconstructed the present moment as belonging to “the modern period,” which “had its beginning in the latter part of the eighteenth-century and its apogee in the first quarter of the twentieth century” (552). He principally agreed with the organizing belief of this period “that a primary function of art and thought is to liberate the individual from the tyranny of his culture in the environmental sense and to permit him to stand beyond it in an autonomy of perception and judgment” (552). But he combined this essentially Romantic conviction with an Enlightenment ideal of culture, a combination that made him a prime example of mid-twentieth-century liberalism and aligned him with the likes of Isaiah Berlin. Thus, as early as the 1920s, he regarded the politics of the Communist Party as a degraded attempt at liberation that was in truth wholly bourgeois – a mere adversary culture. In Ross Posnock’s succinct phrasing, for Trilling “the paradox of Stalinism was that it was a political ideology devoted to destroying politics” (Posnock 66).

For his dissertation and first book, Trilling turned to Matthew Arnold and his Victorian ideal of culture as the only promising path to preserve individual autonomy against civilization’s power of absorption. In the most famous passage of Anarchy and Culture (1869), Arnold had written that “culture being a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world, and, through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh
and free thought upon our stock notions and habits, which we now follow staunchly but mechanically, vainly imagining that there is a virtue in following them staunchly which makes up for the mischief of following them mechanically” (Arnold 5). If culture resisted the mechanical tendencies of civilization, Trilling concluded with Arnold, then the most forceful critique of civilization consisted of the dissemination of culture.

Trilling’s position was deeply ambiguous, and at times verged on contradictions that can no longer be resolved as signs of a dialectical mind: he espoused bourgeois culture in order to protect the individual from the cultural decay brought about by bourgeois society; he had firm allegiances to leftist political aims (true leftism, in his mind, was wholly different from Stalinism), but his political leftism hinged on an aesthetic individualism that in turn rested on a concept of culture which was at once romantically transgressive and committed to the conservative aim of enshrining a canon of Western civilization. It is this dual investment in transgression and conservation that makes Trilling an exemplar of the divided allegiance running through the cold war notion of security.

In his essays from the 1940s, a selection of which was collected in the best-selling *The Liberal Imagination* (1950), Trilling came to identify the politics of literature with the struggle of anticommunism. He found ideal texts to develop his position among the romantics (Wordsworth), realists (Twain), and modernists (Eliot) alike, and in developing his stance, he relied at least as much on critiquing what to him were the antipodes of the liberal imagination: the naturalist novel, the social realism of the Popular Front, the socially engaged criticism of Vernon Louis Parrington. But it was in Henry James’s *The Princess Casamassima* (1886) that he discovered the basis from which he thought communism could be hit the hardest. That basis was described by a phrase which Trilling adopted from James: “the imagination of disaster,” which made look “life … ferocious and sinister” (*Obligation* 151; Trilling quotes from a letter James wrote to A. C. Benson in 1896). Trilling argues that what was clear to James in the 1880s was later entirely forgotten and had to be “painfully learned from our grim glossary of wars and concentration camps, after having seen the state and human nature laid open to our horrified inspection” (151). The optimistic outlook of progressivism, of utopian political movements in general, led to a wholly inadequate understanding of the world. James’s novel, in a manner Trilling “venture[d] to call … incomparable,” acted as a much needed corrective (176).

16 Over the last thirty years, the dominant reception of Trilling has highlighted his conservative side, and denigrated his affirmation of contradiction as a sign of political complacency. In this way, Trilling has served as a prime example of the ideology of liberal. For readings in this vein, see Donald E. Pease, “New Americanists: Revisionist Interventions into the Canon”, Russell Reising, “Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, and the Emergence of the Cultural Discourse of Anti-Stalinism,” Daniel T. O’Hara, *Lionel Trilling: The Work of Liberation*, and Gustavo Guerra, “Trilling’s James: Liberalism and Selfhood in ‘The Princess Casamassima’.”
Like *Les Misérables*, James’s novel combines the exploration of urban misery (it stands out in James’s oeuvre in this regard) with a fascination for social revolution. Indeed, for the purpose of consolidating the link between literature, insecurity, and anticommunism, the novel seems to have appealed to Trilling for mainly two reasons, which I will explore at some length in the following pages. On the level of plot, the story features a young tragic hero who becomes involved in an anarchist terror organization. Unable to muster the determination required for a violent act of terror, he kills himself instead of his designated victim. On the level of form, Trilling highlights James’s combined use of romance and realism. Thanks to the text’s realist aesthetics, the squalor of the urban ghetto, the lived reality of class differences more generally, and the dealings of anarchists take on precise shape. But ultimately, it is the romantic dimension of the novel that comports with Trilling’s brand of adversarial liberalism, his “rationalism after romanticism,” as Leon Wieseltier has aptly called it (Wieseltier xv).

Trilling stresses that romance, for James, is not to be confused with the outright fantastic. If romance relies on the imagination, it is the imagination of the scientist. The imagination of romance and the imagination of science, in this view, are related in that both are a kind of “experiment” (155), a form of experience which is, in James’s words, “experience liberated, so to speak; experience disengaged, disembroiled, disencumbered, exempt from the conditions that usually attach to it” (155).

In the case of James’s anarchist world, the romance’s accuracy centers on the protagonist’s dialectic capaciousness. After having become involved in an anarchist terror plot and having pledged to kill a target to be identified to him by letter, Hyacinth Robinson travels to Paris and Venice and discovers the grandeur of the artistic achievements of Western civilization. He realizes that he can no longer subscribe to a program of destruction, although he continues to share the anarchists’ conviction that this very civilization is responsible for the misery of the masses. As a consequence of what to the cold war mind may have looked like his “Kronstadt,” however, Hycianth does not denounce the secret anarchist organization – which is the path Whittaker Chambers would choose – but commits suicide.

The novel seems to lend itself to be read as a conflict between contemplation and action, between a Paterist withdrawal from the world into art and a political commitment to revolution. It is against this type of interpretation that Trilling unfolds his own. He turns Hyacinth into a hero who, rather than being caught up between art and action, is torn between two different kinds of action. And rather than choosing one, he combines both. In the course of this reading, Trilling argues for an unorthodox interpretation of both anarchy and culture that has immediate import for his literary politics of anticommunism. It also distantly echoes the lessons Whittaker Chambers’s gleaned from *Les Misérables*: revolution and Christianity. Resonating with Chambers’s extracting from Hugo’s novel a notion of revolution that differs from what he presents as Marx’s and Lenin’s attempt to “solve the enigma” and ‘staunch the wound,’” Trilling initially seems drawn to James’s rendition of anarchism.
James envisaged revolution, and not merely as a convenience for his fiction. But he imagined a land of revolution with which we are no longer familiar. It was not a Marxian revolution. There is no upsurge of an angry proletariat led by a disciplined party which plans to head a new strong state. Such a revolution has its conservative aspect – it seeks to save certain elements of bourgeois culture for its own use, for example, science and the means of production and even some social agencies. The revolutionary theory of *The Princess Casamassima* has little in common with this. There is no organized mass movement; there is no disciplined party but only a strong conspiratorial center. (158)

To Trilling, James’s anarchy is not so different from Matthew Arnold’s culture – a force that unsettles everything mechanical – but radically at odds with a communist adversary culture, which, as Trilling had maintained time and again, was ultimately conservative and bourgeois. What’s despicable about Marxism, Trilling’s embrace of anarchism suggests, is the fact that it is radically rational, antiromantic, and non-organic: it is driven by party discipline, a strong and bureaucratic state, and it is enthralled by scientific progress. Compare this to Trilling’s definition of anarchism: “[A]narchism holds that the natural goodness of man is absolute and that society corrupts it, and that the guide to anarchist action is the desire to destroy society in general and not merely a particular social form” (158). Clearly, this kind of anarchism has affinities with an understanding of art that does “damage” in order “to liberate the individual from the tyranny of his culture,” as he would put it in 1965 (552). Anarchism came very close to being adversarial in the best sense. James’s novel, then, was not only a romance of experimental intelligence, but one with a romantic subject: the heroic uprising against oppressive order and convention.17

But Trilling’s sympathy for anarchism had its limits. Anarchism threatened to succumb to the blind, single-minded fanaticism of the Marxist brand of revolution after all. The problem began with anarchism’s tenet that “the natural goodness of man is absolute.” Man’s absolute goodness required making the destruction of society into an objective of unequalled importance. The conflict was a simple one: It was society versus man. Nothing was to get in the way of assuring man’s victory – not even art.

Trilling notes that “in the 1890s there was a strong alliance between the French artists and the anarchist groups. But in the logic of the situation art was bound to come under the anarchist fire. Art is inevitably associated with civil peace and social order and indeed with the ruling classes” (159). For Trilling, of course, the idea that art was reactionary – “a frivolous distraction from revolution” (159) – was completely wrongheaded, and “inevitable” only “in the logic of the situation” of the 1890s. Art, for Trilling, had little to do with

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17 Posnock has drawn attention to the fact that Trilling’s commitment to the opposition between individual and society derives from his premise that the authentic self is ultimately pre-social. For Posnock, this marks the crucial distinction between Trilling and Henry James: “James does not conceive of consciousness as somehow immune from the tyranny of culture and history.... For [James] the attempt to go beyond culture is less an act of emancipation than obedience to the seductive myth that untrammeled freedom is the American birthright” (Posnock 70–71).
civil peace. Thus, after having reinterpreted anarchism, the next step of his essay was to provide an interpretation of art that could undo the distinction between art and action.

When James’s protagonist Hyacinth decides, while reveling in the sensuous pleasures of Paris and Venice, not to carry out his terrorist assignment because he realizes, as he writes to the Princess in his letter from Venice, that “I have been cold all my life, even when I thought I was warm” (Princess 352), Trilling is at pains to emphasize that “the artist quite as much as any man of action carries his ultimate commitment and his death warrant in his pocket” (Obligation 167). But of what does the action of art consist? Trilling seems to have quarreled with this question, and in the end he provides three answers which overlap, even build on each other, but are not wholly compatible with each other.

In his first answer, Trilling sees the Jamesian action of art as driven by “the imperious will, with the music of an army with banners” (168). Poetry is linked to “the triumphs of the world” and “has an affinity with political power in its autocratic and aristocratic form … it is not a friend of the democratic virtues” (168). Thus, Hyacinth Robinson, in favoring art over terror, is not exchanging political action for contemplation, or war for peace, but one type of revolution against another. For both types of revolutionary act, the commitment is absolute.

Trilling’s second take on the nature of literary action takes the first to its moral conclusion. In Hyacinth’s letter from Venice, Trilling writes,

He understands no less clearly than before “the despotisms, the cruelties, the exclusions, the monopolies and the rapacities of the past.” But now he recognizes that “the fabric of civilization as we know it” is inextricably bound up with this injustice; the monuments of art and learning and taste have been reared upon coercive power. (169)

Setting him apart once and for all from his anarchist friends, this view leads Hyacinth not to reject art, but to accept “that civilization has a price, and a high one” (170). Civilization is worth that price – indeed it is indispensable – even if that requires that one strike a deal with the powers that be. For political radicals, this stance would define the action of art as plainly reactionary. But in Trilling’s reading, this type of worldly commitment to the arts, or rather commitment to the world through art, and the acceptance of the guilt it entails, is a sign of “moral realism.” “Moral realism,” as Trilling defines it in this essay in a tone that fuses Nietzsche and Freud, rests on the acceptance that idealism and power go hand in hand. It contrasts with the self-deceptions of bourgeois society, which is incapable of moving beyond “will that hates itself and finds its manifestations guilty and is able to exist only if it operates in the name of virtue” (176). The moral realism of art-action faces up to its own will to power and breaks free from the superego’s tight leash of guilt.

There is, finally, Trilling’s third answer to the question in what sense art is committed action. If the first answer defines art as driven by an imperious will to power, and the second answer justifies this will as a necessary ingredient of the most idealist striving, it is only in the third answer that
Trilling addresses why the imperious acts of art are so indispensable, and why they cannot be given up for the equally imperious will driving political revolution. It is at this point that Trilling draws on the critique of security well established in romantic thought and developed perhaps most fully by Nietzsche. Art, but not political action, whether it is anarchist or Marxist, is set against security, and favors the uncertainty of adventure. In doing so, art, and art alone, does justice to life.

Every known theory of popular revolution gives up the vision of the world “raised to the richest and noblest expression.” To achieve the ideal of widespread security, popular revolutionary theory condemns the ideal of adventurous experience. It tries to avoid doing this explicitly and it even, although seldom convincingly, denies that it does it at all. But all the instincts or necessities of radical democracy are against the superbness and arbitrariness which often mark great spirits. It is sometimes said in the interests of an ideal or abstract completeness that the choice need not be made, that security can be imagined to go with richness and nobility of expression. But we have not seen it in the past and nobody really strives to imagine it in the future. (170)

If the “richness of nobility of expression” stands in the service of the full life, if the longing for adventurous experience, “undaunted by fear yet fearful of the total eradication of fear” (Hamilton 248), is erected as the opposite of an ideal of security, a state in which all fear and worry (cura) has been removed, we have entered a Nietzschean realm of thought. “Build your cities on the slopes of Vesuvius!” he demands in The Gay Science, “Send your ship into uncharted seas! Live at war with your peers and yourselves!” (§283, p.228). Nietzsche’s aim in courting danger is not the elevation of death over life, or the giving in to a sheer recklessness that stops making sense altogether. It is rather the attempt to live according to the principles of life itself, and these are, to use Trilling’s terms, “superb and arbitrary.”

Trilling’s invocation of the duality of adventure and security, it must be stressed once more, gets its anticomunist edge from opposing adventure to political revolution. The romantic strife against security might be said to support all kinds of social movements. But the point of James’s novel, in Trilling’s reading, is precisely that even the most romantic and order-averse of such movements – anarchism, with its philosophy of amorphism – must ultimately deny the fullness of life, and its “richest and noblest expression.”

James Der Derian succinctly summarizes the Nietzschean critique: “Originating in the paradoxical relationship of a contingent life and a certain death, the history of security reads for Nietzsche as an abnegation, a resentment and, finally, a transcendence of this paradox” (“The Value of Security” 156). On Nietzsche and security, see also Hamilton 245–255. When writing about Nietzsche in “On the Teaching of Modern Literature,” Trilling by contrast emphasizes the moderating intent of Nietzsche’s dialectic between the Dionysian and the Apollonian. “This sadic [sic] and masochistic frenzy, Nietzsche is at pains to insist [in The Birth of Tragedy], needs the taming hand of Apollo before it can become tragedy, but it is the primal stuff of great art, and to the modern experience of tragedy this explanation seems far more pertinent than Aristotle’s…” (Obligation 392).
Trilling praises James’s extraordinary vision of turning Hyacinth into a heroic martyr figure who comprehends and embodies the contradictions of his culture and, in experiencing the impossibility of their reconciliation, becomes a tragic character: “He is a hero of civilization because he dares do more than civilization does: embodying two ideals at once, he takes upon himself, in full consciousness, the guilt of each. ... By his death he instructs us in the nature of civilized life and by his consciousness he transcends it” (172). Trilling here commits a remarkable slippage. Is it Hyacinth he is praising? The bookbinder who combines the commitment to art with the commitment to social change by sacrificing himself in order to honor both commitments? Or is Trilling praising James as embodied by Hyacinth (who, towards the very end of the novel, takes up writing rather than binding books)? Or is the true hero of the essay Lionel Trilling himself?* The commitment to civilization in life and death, and the transcendence of civilization in consciousness, is precisely the promise an adversarial literature holds out. The model to be followed by intellectuals, Trilling suggests, is not the man who combines the commitment to both art and political radicalism, but the literary artist who imagines, with the experimental intelligence of the romancer, the transgression of civilization in the service of civilization. In contrast to Hyacinth, whose only solution to live this dialectics is suicide, the literary intellectual has the ability, in Adam Kirsch’s words, “to ‘embody two ideals at once’ and still live – indeed, to flourish” (Kirsch 68). If the romancer shares the scientist’s experimental imagination, this kind of intelligence is not at all described by a cold mechanical rationality generally associated with the sciences. The experimental romancer is an adventurer, a great spirit marked by “superbness and arbitrariness.” His orientation to life is averted to security, and thanks to this investment in insecurity, he can procure humanity’s future flourishing within civilization.

IV. Arthur Schlesinger: Insecurity, Tragedy, National Security

Like Whittaker Chambers and Lionel Trilling, historian Arthur Schlesinger found a resource in literature for an explicitly antitotalitarian argument against the ideal of security. In *The Vital Center* (1949), writers play a key role in the fight against totalitarianism because they are the “prophets” of “a new sense of the meaning of freedom”: they “refused to swallow the fantastic hypocrisies involved in the defense of totalitarianism” (147). The most prominent place among literary prophets Schlesinger assigns to Hawthorne, whose *The Blithedale Romance* he presents as a work that speaks with urgency to the threats to liberty arising from a blind faith in progress and human perfectability. His embrace of Hawthorne’s novel is a rather obvious choice.

* Critics have suggested as much. In Ross Posnock’s words, James’s novel becomes “a political allegory in which an Arnoldian apostle of high culture is sacrificed to the machinations of Stalinist fellow travelers” (67). And in Mark Krupnick’s reading “Hyacinth becomes a version of Trilling’ own idealized self as a hero of culture” (Krupnick 71).
Hawthorne’s work is famously marked by a deep-seated pessimism about human nature; moreover, politically Hawthorne was on the conservative end of canonical mid-nineteenth-century writers. And by satirically taking up the utopian community of Brook Farm, *Blithedale* was furthermore an almost inevitable candidate for a mid-twentieth-century critique of optimistic progressivism. But turning to a nineteenth-century classic has another advantage for Schlesinger. It allows him, similarly to Trilling, to tell the story of a regrettable amnesia that amounts to a national sin:

> With his intense conviction of the weakness of man before the temptations of pride and power, Hawthorne extrapolated unerringly from the pretty charades of Brook Farm to the essence of totalitarian man. Yet during the next century the serene course of progress seemed to give little warrant to the violence of Hawthorne’s political imagination. The insights into the egotism of power consequently vanished from the mind of the liberal intellectual. (162)

Instead of heeding Hawthorne’s warning, Schlesinger complains, progressives attacked Hawthorne’s skepticism as a form of political quietism. Schlesinger is particularly critical of Vernon L. Parrington (who is also the target of “Reality in America,” Trilling’s perhaps most vicious polemic): “the figure of Hollingsworth,’ Parrington could remark with sarcasm, is ‘Hawthorne’s reply to the summons of the social conscience of the times.’ … the Brandeises and Parringtons were caught off guard, … nothing in their system prepared them for totalitarianism” (163). Hawthorne, on the other hand, “with the artist’s prescience glimpsed the ultimate possibilities of a belief in perfectibility” (161).

We’re familiar by now with the corner stones of the kind of argument Schlesinger rehearses: the dangers of optimistic progressivism and its the pursuit of the illusion of security; the persistence of evil; the need to come to terms with human limitations; the key role accorded to literature and its prescient creators in demonstrating all of the above. However, Schlesinger’s account differs from Chambers’s and Trilling’s in two respects – though less in position than in emphasis. First, he sees the attractiveness of communism in the social ramifications of the industrial revolution. While Chambers explains the appeal of totalitarianism to come out of its providing a last opportunity for heroism and faith, and Trilling is too preoccupied with the potentials and impediments of the liberal imagination to tackle this question explicitly (considering his judgment of the cultural expression approved by communism, it is indeed vexing wherein might lie its appeal), in Schlesinger’s view it is modern industrial society itself that has created the problem: “Our modern industrial economy, based on impersonality, interchangeability, and speed, has worn away the old protective securities without creating new ones. It has failed to develop an organizational framework of its own within which self-realization on a large scale is possible” (51). This is where totalitarianism comes in, by selling an illusion as a solution: “As a system of social organization, it purports to invest life with meaning and purpose. Against the loneliness and rootlessness of man in free society, it promises the security and comradeship of a crusading unity, propelled by a deep and driving faith” (54).
Though Schlesinger does not make this explicit, “security” for him lies at the core of the problem of totalitarianism in two distinct, but related senses. Security expresses a belief in Enlightenment rationality that underestimates how this very rationality can turn into a nightmare of immorality, made all the more likely by the moral weakness of man, which subscribers to optimistic Enlightenment overlook. But security, in Schlesinger’s usage, also refers to the psychological state attending organic wholeness in the realm of sociality, which has been replaced by the modern condition of alienation, and has in turn become all the more desirable. Consequently, the longing for security has become open to political exploitation.

Strictly speaking, security as radical rationality and security as an emotional state are rather different entities. But if Schlesinger does not point out their difference, it is because for him they share three things: both are predicated on the assumption of the total absence of contingency, which allows for a state without fear or worry (securitas in its literal sense); both are what totalitarian systems – meaning, primarily of course, the Soviet Union – promise to provide; and both need to be accepted as permanently outside the reach of humanity. For security as rationality, this has always been the case; as to the psychological security of social belonging, its impossibility is the result of industrial modernity.

Schlesinger, secondly, differs from Chambers and Trilling in his determination to think through the consequences which the above analysis has for policy. If the absence of security in its two dimensions – as rational progress, and as psychological bliss growing out of social organicism – must be accepted, what is the role the United States is to adopt in a world threatened by spreading totalitarianism?

Schlesinger’s answer is a justification of the containment policy first devised by George Kennan in the “Long Telegram,” given full expression in the Truman Doctrine (of which Kennan became a sharp critic), and institutionalized in NATO, as well as a wholehearted approval of the Marshall Plan. In Schlesinger’s benevolent interpretation, neither containment nor the Marshall Plan is “a policy of threatening Soviet interests in what has become the settled sphere of Soviet power” (224). And both policies only work together: “Without the Marshall Plan, the Truman Doctrine would become a program of resisting Communism by sheer force – and would be doomed to failure” (226). For Schlesinger, these two dimensions of cold war policy are of a piece with the view that history is “tragic” – a view shared by Kennan and Niebuhr (as well as Chambers and Trilling, who speak less, however, about

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20 See John Lewis Gaddis’s biography of Kennan, particularly chapter 10–12. For the debates surrounding the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan, see also Craig and Logevall’s America’s Cold War, and for a special focus on the policy debates with regard to the emerging ideology of national security, see Michael Hogan, A Cross of Iron.
In “Policy and National Interest,” a review of Kennan’s *American Diplomacy, 1900–1950 – and the Challenge of Soviet Power*, written for *Partisan Review* in 1951, Schlesinger writes that

the Kennan approach … comprehends [the revelations of international amorality] in his understanding of the tragedy of history. … The fact that international relations are amoral does not mean to him that moral factors play no part; nor does it absolve the individual from moral responsibility. This, indeed, is in his view the tragedy of history: man cannot escape decision, but the complexity of events diffuses the burden of guilt, and, beyond this, so much is inherently insoluble. (709)

The United States, we might say, shares the condition of Hyacinth Robinson. Being on the side of civilization morally imposes action, but action cannot be engaged in without incurring guilt. Not acting at all, however, would only compound guilt. An analogous argument also goes for the makeup of the U.S. state. “[U]nder the pressures of industrial organization,” the liberal state has begun to break away from its mission to ensure the individual’s flourishing in freedom (*Vital Center* 8). But if the state has fallen short of its promise, it is still to be preferred to the totalitarian alternative: “[T]he liberal state acknowledged many limitations in its demands upon men: the total state acknowledges none. … If organization corrupts, total organization corrupts totally” (8–9). For the cold war liberalism exemplified by Schlesinger, there is no alternative to robustly defending the national interest, and to restructuring the state accordingly.

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21 One gets a sense of Kennan’s flair for tragedy from a journal entry from 1965 (at which point Kennan had lost his influence in the policy-making world). He muses on “the injustices you have done to people; the tragedies that may not yet have happened, but do happen – and are bound to; – in short, the whole tragic bedrock of existence” (qtd. in Gaddis 598). Niebuhr, for his part, distinguished between irony, tragedy, and pathos: “My effort to distinguish ‘ironic’ elements in our history from tragic and pathetic ones, does not imply the denial of tragic and pathetic aspects in our contemporary experience. It does rest upon the conviction that the ironic elements are more revealing” (*Irony* xxiii). What Niebuhr meant by irony is not principally different from what Schlesinger referred to as tragedy (as his benevolent interpretation of U.S. cold war policies attests): “The ironic situation is distinguished from a pathetic one by the fact that the person involved in it bears some responsibility for it. It is differentiated from tragedy by the fact that the responsibility is related to an unconscious weakness rather than to a conscious resolution” (xxiv).

22 There is some ambiguity in Schlesinger’s account about what the precise nature of the liberal state’s shortcoming (understood as a necessary evil) is. In his final chapter, Schlesinger calls for turning freedom into a “fighting faith.” He envisions a “new radicalism,” which, “drawing strength from a realistic conception of man, dedicates itself to problems as they come, attacking them in terms which best advance the human and libertarian values, which best secure the freedom and fulfillment of the individual” (256). In this light, the liberal state’s inevitable weakness seems to lie in the cold formalism of a legalistic liberalism which robs citizens of the possibility to be actively committed to the *res publica*. The problem of the free society, then, is anomic, which the Soviet system exploits. But what runs against this interpretation – which essentially reads Schlesinger as critiquing liberalism from a republican position – is his emphasis on civil liberties as the core of the free society. The necessary evil of the liberal state would then be the necessary restriction of individual liberties in the fight
anism appear as acceptable positions once the cornerstones of the cold war paradigm are accepted. American destiny has become manifest once again: “History has thrust a world destiny on the United States… [W]e are in the great world to stay; and two world wars have made us aware of this fact with a sad sense of irrevocability. No one need argue the interventionist-isolationist debate any more” (219).

Throughout his writings of the late 1940s and early 1950s, Schlesinger’s term of choice for describing the impetus of U.S. engagement in the world is “national interest.” It may be that he clung to this term in order to avoid what sounded like a paradox: namely that accepting the fact that security is unattainable requires a commitment to national security. Indeed, Schlesinger’s work from the early cold war period captures the moment at which the resemanticization of the term “security” is still in full swing. But to be precise, what we observe here is less a resignification than a layering of meanings, which alone explains the full complexity of the postwar concept of security. It isn’t just that the ideal of security becomes replaced by the idea of security as a tragic defense of freedom. It is rather that the latter notion negatively builds on the former, keeping both alive in a single term. To give just one example of this palimpsestic assemblage: In his review of Kennan’s book, Schlesinger mentions that Kennan “looks for American security to be preserved by preventing any single power from dominating the Eurasian land mass” (708). For Schlesinger, such a preventive step in the name of national

against communism. And this, of course, was indeed the central issue in the debate over national security. Notably, it led to Walter Lippman’s critique of Kennan’s containment policy, which, Lippman argued in a series of articles in the New York Herald Tribune, would lead to U.S. military engagement around the world, and to the militarization of society. Lippman collected the articles in a book, called it The Cold War, and thus had coined a seminal term. As becomes clear in Michael Hogan’s painstakingly detailed account of the policy debates of the national security policies, the supporters of national security insisted on big government that “would concentrate authority in a strong executive or in a series of administrative czars who would manage military affairs on an efficient basis” (23). Military affairs, in this context, had to be understood in a broad sense, relating to “civilian and military resources behind a permanent program of peacetime military preparedness” (23). Seen from this perspective, Schlesinger’s defense of a “necessary evil” aligns him with the liberal promoters of the national security state, whose vision is summarized by Hogan: “Although government would grow larger, taxes would go up, and budget deficits would become a matter of routine, none of these and other transformations would add up to the crushing regime symbolized in the metaphor of the garrison state. The outcome instead would be an American national security state that was shaped as much by the country’s democratic political culture as it was by the perceived military imperatives of the Cold war” (22). It should be noted, however, that Schlesinger was strictly opposed to McCarthyism and related attempts to abrogate civil liberties. Without liberty, he argued, no free society, and without free society, the victory of totalitarianism was certain. “Hysteria is … a useful secret weapon for the enemies of free society,” he writes in The Vital Center (208), and calls for a broad anticommunist consensus (which makes for one of the meanings of his book’s title): “The non-Communist left and the non-fascist right must collaborate to keep free society truly free” (209).
Cold War Liberalism and the Problem of Security

security becomes necessary because one has to be pessimistic about human nature (i.e., about the Soviet leaders), and surely it will involve the U.S. in political tragedy. But all this still presupposes that “security [can] be preserved.”

Growing out of the anticommunist critique of the ideal of security, then, is a revised understanding of security that stresses an active engagement in the world and connotes the full range of what cold war intellectuals mounted against the “communist vision,” including a tragic sense of history, an affirmation of human limitation, the aim to preserve the fullness of life in its richness and nobility, and the related imperative to live life as an adventurous experience. In a truly palimpsestic manner, the search for security – and the politics of national security – could thus become a heroic, tragic, and adventurous endeavor that nonetheless kept alive, beneath the surface as it were, the old notion of the ideal of security as the absence of threat, the arbitrary, and adventurous. Put differently, cold war intellectuals increasingly thought of security as an adventurous process, without relinquishing the conviction that security is a mistaken dream of a state in which there is nothing to worry about.

At times, the two semantic layers of security became indistinguishable, and the tensions between state violence and the ideals which the state embodied became resolved in a powerful ideology of American exceptionalism. When this was the case, the aspiration to a state of security became palatable because the ideal of security became defined as a state of order and peace of a particular kind: what was ensured to survive there was characterized precisely by the fullness of a life lived as an adventurous experience. In this mode, the politics of security turned into an engagement in insecurity, the goal of which was to secure insecurity.

But because “securing insecurity” only made sense against the negative vision of a detrimental, overly rationalist ideal of security – as embodied in the Soviet Union – the two semantic layers of security in liberal discourse could not be kept in stable congruity: since security continued to be defined by the expunging of the contingent, accidental, and adventurous, insecurity by definition could not be “secured.” The critical thrust of liberalism’s commitment to the accidental, uncertain, and “adversarial” – modeled on the “lessons” of literature – made it difficult to fully subscribe to the national security state, even if that state claimed to offer the only defense against totalitarianism. The attempt to normatively justify national security on the basis of the rejection of the ideal of security remained a self-defeating endeavor. While national security could be successfully harmonized with the tragic view of politics espoused by Schlesinger, the liberal engagement with literature suggested that it could not in the long run be squared with the demands of doing justice to life. Only art could do that. This, I suggest, is the final political implication of the cold war liberals’ insistence on the autonomy of art.
Works Cited


