Introduction

Practices of Hope and Tales of Disenchantment

These are disenchanted times in literary criticism. There are indeed plenty of reasons for anger, despair, and disappointment today. While circumstances can create suffering, however, they do not dictate the dispositions with which those conditions are met. Disenchantment is the disposition that political theorist Jane Bennett describes as arising when the world is pictured as “a place of death and alienation,” and when “the very characterization of the world as disenchanted ignores and then discourages affective attachment to that world.” Although disenchantment is not the only such disposition, it is the one criticism has most often endorsed, maintaining practices of professionalization in a discipline that—perhaps not coincidentally—finds itself of rapidly decreasing interest to students and broader audiences. We did not invent critical disenchantment, of course. Nearly seven decades ago, Richard Chase complained of his colleagues who sever and reject, fetishize alienated emotions, dismiss previous generations, and “puff our inner righteousness into an image of the universe and annihilate every other image.” That long history does not mean, however, that disenchantment is intrinsic to literary critique. Neither Bennett nor Chase questions the need for critique of an unjust world. What they do challenge is the assumption that to be effective, critique must become what Bennett calls a “disenchantment tale,” narrowing it to exclude the replenishing experiences of wonder that make the world worth fighting for and encourage resilience when those struggles seem overwhelming; disenchantment tales discourage “affective connections” in contexts where detachment is dangerous.

Recent challenges to critical disenchantment have taken on the label of “postcritique.” This movement challenges the knee-jerk suspicion with which critics scrutinize a text's purported depths for ideologi-
cal wrongdoings (and, less often, subversions thereof) by abstract and clearly distinguishable agents locked in easily schematized struggle. What Jennifer Fleissner characterizes as “the self-aggrandizing tendencies of the moralized ideology critique” rarely acknowledges complexities of complicity or motivation, least of all on the part of the seemingly objective, unimplicated, and superior critic. My sympathies are with this critique of critique. But I want to argue that contemporary criticism comprises at least three versions of critique, not one, and that they require separate considerations. The first version is the most exasperating because of its rote and often cynical predictability, arising from professionalization into a discipline in which a tone of self-congratulatory indignation is taken as the sign of critical acuity and topical relevance imagined to be requisite for publication, job placement, and academic advancement. It is this version of critique that has pushed some to seek methodological alternatives in a desire to move “post” critique.

It is a mistake, however, to abandon critique simply because it has been badly used. Any critical methodology can become grad school doxa and eventually grow hackneyed, which does not make it unnecessary. Yet even suspicious critique at its more vigorous—the second version—should not continue unaltered. It arose from a Cold War state epistemology that, maintained melancholically long past the Cold War’s end, not only makes critique seem outdated but puts its conservative methodology and progressive content at cross-purposes. Despite its perpetuation of the divisive and disenchanted Cold War disposition, however, I believe a third version of critique is possible. Less belated and more suited to current needs in academia and beyond, the critique I have in mind centers on two terms—“idealism” and “imagination”—that may seem naive or old-fashioned but are essential to making criticism more than a disenchantment tale.

My argument is that critique at its best comprises the analytical challenge of expressed idealism. Theodor Adorno insists that every utopian statement is a “determined negation,” a critique of the present in the act of articulating a more desirable future. The opposite is also true: every critique is a determined affirmation, an inverted expression of idealism. In offering critiques, we measure the present or the past against ideals, in comparison to which what is or has been seems inadequate.
and unjust. Without ideals, there would be no critique. But our ideals are effaced by rituals of professionalization in a discipline that regards articulation of idealism as a sign of naïveté, triviality, or bad faith, making idealism cause for embarrassment. A critique that states our ideals, in contrast, would make clear what we are for, demonstrating how idealism is the basis for ethical judgment and encouraging the shaping and expression of ideals necessary to social engagement and change. Affirming our ideals, we claim for critique its greatest and most generous social relevance.

Idealism, always present, implicitly and explicitly, in critique, is not enough. Imagination is what makes idealism a social practice. Too often, however, current habits of critique brush aside the ficticity of imaginative literature as mere reflection or obfuscation of something real prior to and weightier than fantasy. But literature’s unreality is what makes it most socially relevant. Imagination guarantees the perpetual unreality of ideals, refusing the imperative “reality” that limits the possible to what is or has been, to precedent and presence. More constructively, imagination shapes ideals into worlds, giving them the look of the social in ways that keep us from abandoning our desire for material consequences, and simultaneously making the social into an unreal—and hence reimaginable—possibility. Imagination allows us to express ideals in familiar forms—as a system, a social structure—without accepting as necessary the terms in which that familiarity is currently constituted. When we acknowledge imagination as the proper location of the ideal, we infuse the real with inexhaustible wonder. Embracing critical imagination will mean relinquishing our infatuation with fact, evidence, and the supposedly transparent realness of history or sociology, the stable and empirical sources of what Rita Felski analyzes as the illusion of “context” and hence of “meanings.” What we get in return is the unpredictable and potentially liberating possibility of enchantment, as available to critique as to the literature it analyzes. And that, too, is central to critique’s potential for social engagement and change, for there is no significant social change without imagination. “In imagining what is possible, in imagining what does not yet exist,” Sara Ahmed writes, “we say yes to . . . the possibility of things not staying as they are, or being as they stay.” The same imagination that can make literature a rejection of what is in favor of what might be can turn critique into a radically trans-
formative affirmation. Far from being a disenchantment tale, a critique
that embraces that visionary function produces what F. O. Matthiessen
calls “imaginative vitality.”

As my citations of Chase and Matthiessen suggest, in setting about
the work of reimagining critique, we need not start from scratch. Eve
Sedgwick suggests that the new life of the discipline lies, paradoxically,
in the past, and I agree. The following chapters offer models for a re-
vitalized critique drawn from Cold War era intellectuals. Although often
disparaged as apologists for American exceptionalism and the Cold War
consensus, these critics, I will show, not only strenuously opposed the
conformity and paranoid destructiveness of Cold War America but en-
visioned more just and humane alternatives. Subject to harassment, ar-
rest, and loss of jobs, they had ample reasons for disenchantment, and
some of the most prominent critics of this era suffered from alcoholism,
mental breakdowns, and suicide. What is striking, however, is how little
disenchantment there is in their criticism. On the contrary, they articu-
late remarkable wonder at the imaginative possibilities of literature as a
source of social critique and, more surprisingly, transformation. How
imaginative idealism continued to thrive in their criticism despite the
odds and how we might, as they did, turn disenchanted critique into a
practice of hope are the subjects of this book.

Hope, as I use the term, is different from optimism or want, its two most
common synonyms. Far from implying a cheery faith that all will turn
out well, hope, as I will discuss shortly, relies on disappointment and
failure. And because ideals are by nature incommensurate with lived
conditions, hope is a continuous dissatisfaction; unlike wants, it cannot
be satisfied. Instead, hope, as a perpetual openness to the as-yet-untried,
is an end in itself. Hope is a disposition toward the imaginative value of
dissatisfaction and the social value of illusion, whimsy, vision, reverie,
daydreams, all sources of world making trivialized within disciplinary
regimes of the “real.” Hope is the articulation of the origins of critique
in imaginative idealism, self-consciously unachievable standards for liv-
ing, tested and refined in the context of an as-yet-unreal world, against
which real conditions inevitably come up short. Hope is what I would
identify as the *literariness* of literature. It is also the thing without which
social change is impossible.
Literary critics, persistent in their suspicion, have overlooked the centrality of hope to cultural theorists who have described its socially transformative powers. Hope as a disposition can be central to what Nancy Bentley calls “a collective mood-shift” in contemporary literary studies. Because of its transformative potential as a disposition rather than a prescriptive program, hope may avoid the charges of political complacency that have dogged some other methodologies identified with that shift. At a time when suspicious critique is often taken to be synonymous with politics, challenges to the former can “easily be dismissed as politically quietist, too willing to accept things as they are,” as Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus acknowledge, though they refute that charge with the argument that “immersion in texts (without paranoia or suspicion about their merit or value)” may result in an “attentiveness to the artwork as itself a kind of freedom.”

They speculate that “in relinquishing the freedom dream that accompanies the work of demystification, we might be groping toward some equally valuable, if less glamorous, states of mind.”

Although I agree that greater attention to the artwork can generate new freedoms, I worry that a programmatic change (reading a text’s surface rather than searching its depths, for example) without a clearly articulated shift in disposition (one can read surfaces as suspiciously as one reads depths) will produce the fallacies John Guillory calls “spontaneous philosophies,” which arise from “the assumption that epistemological positions have a necessary relation to political positions.” Responding to a perceived crisis in the ways we read now, we run the risk of unintentionally replicating some of critique’s least salutary features: the binary logics, the self-righteously unambiguous and unambivalent presentation of rote conclusions, the lack of critical self-contextualization, the denial of inheritances from earlier critical movements we imagine we have surpassed in sophistication and ethical commitment. If we simply make critique into the object of suspicious scrutiny, feeling superior to and unimplicated in what we would move “post,” all we are likely to produce is critique après la lettre. I believe, however, that a critical disposition toward hope can play a social role without suspicion or objectivity. Hope, as a dispositional alternative, promises an approach to social engagement that revises, rather than relinquishes, criticism’s “freedom dream” in at least three ways.
First, hope challenges present social conditions insofar as they fail to live up to a reader’s ideals. Hopeful analysis does not stop with the critique of what is, however, but works through the damaging consequences of those conditions to arrive at constructive—although not naively utopian—alternatives. As Julia Kristeva asserts, “It is only by traversing our grief that there can be any possibility of hope.” Maintaining historical specificity through critique of existing circumstances, hope nevertheless does not confine its ideals to historiographical definitions of the real that limit the scope of the possible. Hope retains a trace of material history through the terms of critique while denying, in its ideals of the possible, the imperative precedents of history or the limits on possibility imposed by truth claims grounded in empirical appeals to material “reality.” This is the second function of hope: to open to the imagination abstract values, suggesting new applications for venerable concepts in ways that bring us together in public acts of deliberation. And last and most important, hope engages readers in the speculative world making it models and inspires.

Understood in this way, hope is socially transformative, although not in the narrowest sense “political.” Hopeful ideals generate social engagement, as I have suggested, by providing the standards against which the already existing world is measured. That function can rely on individual ideals, but the work of social transformation requires collective deliberation at least as much as individual critique. To that end, ideals in their fullness generate critique, but as a means of collective deliberation they must be evacuated of any fixed content. They must be recognizable by a group as the placeholder of meanings that are not predetermined and are, therefore, subject to deliberative participation. “Democracy,” for example, is perceived by many as an ideal worthy of collective consideration, yet the definition of that term is subject to collective (but not necessarily consensual) meaning making, which in turn not only defines but becomes democratic. An ideal thus becomes a practice of hope because of its emptiness, which is not an absence of meaning but an availability of multiple (but not limitless) meanings. Describing this seeming paradox as a practice he calls hope, Ernesto Laclau observes that hope registers an unfulfilling present, being “always related to something which is lacking.” He describes how “empty signifiers” allow groups with diverse demands to converge under the umbrella of
an “empty” ideal, forming what he calls “a political frontier.” Such frontiers strengthen hope by allowing those who make demands to feel part of a larger—even a universal—collectivity that also gives specificity to abstractions that become anchored, through particular wants, to historical contingencies. The exchange between universals and particularities generates what Laclau calls “a moment of hope,” the occasion for a practice by which demands collect to form a political force and are given ethical extension.

The process Laclau describes is a perpetual struggle, evacuating ideals even as it strives to reconceive them. Such perpetual yearning for alternative presents is hope as a passion and hence as politics. This is where the quality of imagination joins with evacuated ideals to form what Chantal Mouffe calls a “kind of place-holder for all those things that cannot be reduced to interest or rationality,” among which she includes “all those things that a rationalist approach is unable to understand in the very construction of human subjectivity and identity.” For Mouffe, political progress comes out of hope’s perpetually unfinished business, or what she calls “the radical impossibility of democracy.” Arguing that democracy “is something that will always need to be a project which we are going to fight for, but knowing that we will never be able to reach it,” Mouffe concludes that “there is no final goal—democracy is a process.”

The democratic project arising from evacuated signifiers takes specific shape if we assume, for example, that “race” is not a fixed position but a dis-position, an evacuated sign that allows the imaginative construction of new “postrace” narratives. This is the case made by Ramón Saldívar, who writes that “postrace” novels “perform the critical work of symbolic action, denoting the public work of the private imagination.” Saldívar insists that such imaginings are enacted not from a fixed social position but “through the pathway of fantasy in the service of the profoundly unsymbolic racialized imagination.” The “historical fantasy” is thus released from symbolic representation, giving rise not to a subject determined by established life narratives, as the “racial” subject, but to an actor in the collective invention of what Saldívar calls “new political destinies.” Understood in this way, fantasy is not “merely phantasmal depiction of deep ideological mystifications”—a description that sounds like many literary critics’ concept of a text’s narrative as an obfuscation
of “deeper” ideological meanings—but the basis for understanding and joining in the making of new social “destinies we may witness taking shape among diasporic groups in the US today.”22 “Race,” evacuated of given significances, becomes a dynamic basis for new “political frontiers.” And it is Saldívar’s own inventive ideal of a relationship between narrative and history in which the latter does not overdetermine the former that makes his a critical practice of hope.

The terms central to these contemporary critics’ various definitions of hope—“loss,” “emptiness,” “evacuation,” and “dissatisfaction”—may seem strange synonyms for a concept usually associated with optimism. But these terms describe states of unsettlement and dissatisfaction—crisis and disappointment—central to any practice of hope. That practice welcomes, even instigates, what Gayatri Spivak calls “bring[ing] to crisis.” At the heart of both crisis and hope, Spivak says, is “that moment which you cannot plan for,” which forces “something inherited” to “jump into something other, and fix onto something that is opposed.” Shaken loose from the stranglehold of precedent and convention, an unanticipated moment can rearrange the social landscape, generating possibilities that require, in Spivak’s words, “not the leap of faith, which hope brings into crisis, but rather the leap of hope.”23 Describing a disturbance of the known akin to Spivak’s crisis, Ernst Bloch articulates hope’s refusal to “make peace with the existing world,” which denies the change and chance that, for Bloch, frustrate any assertions of finality, predictability, or satisfaction. The affective response to hope’s refusal of “the existing world” is what Bloch calls disappointment, which is not the sign of despair but the productive proof that hope is doing its work, that people are being propelled beyond the limits of complacency. According to Bloch, we know “well-founded hope, mediated, guiding hope,” because, unlike wants with predefined satisfactions, it is almost certainly accompanied by disappointment, without which “it would not be hope.”24

In Bloch’s view, disappointment—the affective condition of crises in the known—is therefore the metric of critique’s ethical judgments. For Bloch, power runs like a current through assemblages of fact, which are versions of experience told from positions of dominance, discrediting competing accounts as naïveté, ignorance, or triviality. But those accounts represent someone’s (often a collective someone’s) ideal realness,
and when these versions rub together, hope is the friction. Discerning that “so-called facts are not standing still, but are circulating and developing,” Bloch contends that hope attains the right—the obligation—not only to reveal but to judge the tendencies of the real. It is that act of judgment that makes critique a social force. Similarly, activism, for Rebecca Solnit, is a practice of hope, springing from the belief that “another world might be possible, not promised, not guaranteed, but made.” Such making is only possible, however, with the simultaneous evacuation—the putting into crisis—of the real accompanied by the imaginative idealism of hope. As Solnit notes, the common feature of transformative social movements “is that they begin in the imagination, in hope.”

The irony is that imagination is often what leads to dismissals of hope as trivial, but imagination constitutes hope’s reparative capacity. Such derogations are common in a society where the humanities in general and literary studies in particular are seen as impractical luxuries and wastes of time (who would want an imaginative, much less an idealistic, workforce?). But literature, for Bloch, has an essential social function as the site of what he calls “anticipatory illuminations,” which represent what “has not yet become, that which has still not been accomplished, but which has not been thwarted in existence.” For Bloch, anticipatory illuminations constitute what Michael Taussig calls “the half-awake world” in which “free-floating attention” generates hope. Emerging from such states does not mean, for Taussig, “awakening from a period of inertia to one of action,” but rather engaging an imaginative “demystification and re-enchantment” of the real that gives hope “an electrifying role to play.”

Thus conceived, hope arises from what the midcentury American literary critic Newton Arvin names “the marvelous, the picturesque, the half-incredible,” all of which he attributes to imaginative literature. In making that claim, Arvin is the heir to Ralph Waldo Emerson, who endorses a belief in “the Unattainable, the flying Perfect.” For Emerson, literature imagines into being “a point outside of our hodiernal circle through which a new one may be described”; it “afford[s] us a platform whence we may command a view of our present life, a purchase by which we may move it.” Or, as Arvin writes of Whitman, “Wonder and reverence and a mystical faith that based itself upon them, this—and not respect for demonstrable fact”—is the desirable state of mind for approaching literature. Arvin’s reference to wonder anticipates Jane
Bennett’s description of an “ethic for a disenchanted world,” which requires “the exercise of imagination. Though not quite an imperative, imagination is an interior ‘injunction,’ a ‘weakly messianic’ urge to exercise one’s capacity to see things as otherwise than they are. Imagination energizes us with alternatives, with the power of the new and startling and wonderful. The burden of this task falls to imagination now that, unfortunately, the outside, everyday world—disenchanted of spirit—is utterly unable to inspire and enliven us.”  

It may be difficult to believe that hope holds these possibilities, since political disenchantment in the United States derives in part from too much rhetoric about hope. From Ronald Reagan’s “New Day in America” to Barack Obama’s “Audacity of Hope,” such invocations consistently prove enticements to surrender social imagination to a government that gestures toward inclusion but more typically generates the estranged conditions that lead citizens to grasp at such flimsy promises. Rhetorics of hope coming from mainstream politicians can contribute to disenchantment by promising effortlessly enchanted futures. Yet disenchantment, in political rhetoric as in literary criticism, is subject to revision. If hope, in contemporary political discourse, is a hollow concept, then like all evacuated signifiers it is also an opportunity.

Seizing this opportunity will have profound consequences for the practice of literary criticism, starting with who we imagine literary critics to be. Hand in hand with conventional critical practices that assert as fact claims for what a text is “really” saying beneath its aesthetic distractions or on its surface goes the construction of the critic as objective, disinvested, and terribly serious. Challenging ideology is hard work, and critics may be forgiven impulses to heighten their gravity by disparaging what is trivial, superficial, fantastic, and speculative, all elements of the text’s distracting surface. But no critique is complete without the simultaneity of familiarity and wonder, of the real and the anticipatory. Taking hope as a critical disposition may have to start with a change of self-conception by the critic. When I advocate for hopeful reading, then, I am urging us to forsake claims to constant suspicious vigilance and instead heed the “half-awake” nature of literature, its traffic in daydreams, reveries, speculations, intuitions, all sources of imaginative idealism.

Literature is a training ground in the unreal—what Bennett, following Friedrich Schiller, calls an “aesthetic education”—and hence a pow-
erful partner in the work of critique aimed not at the text but alongside it. If we see literature not only as the object of criticism but as its best source of restorative wonder, we might again have a critique in the service of what R. W. B. Lewis called “living value,” a self-transforming and adaptable willingness to hold vision above necessity. Literature’s hopefulness, Newton Arvin tells us, is “accessible as always to those who wish not merely to ‘interpret the world variously’ (in Marx’s phrase) but to change it.” Without hope, we have, in Arvin’s words, “no more notion of what literature is about than a mole has of astronomy.” As literary critics scramble to prove our relevance, instead of selling out our stock-in-trade in exchange for greater market shares in the “real world,” we might try showing how the unreal world—the realm of idealism and imagination, of hope—is precisely what makes literary study valuable, even necessary. Before making that case, though, we may have to relearn how to approach literature not with suspicion but with what Richard Chase calls “a kind of thought which is bounteous, in the sense that it is open-minded, skeptical, and humanist.”

A more bounteous criticism will first require a change in disposition. A frame of mind or orientation, a disposition is less self-conscious than a methodology and more sustained than a mood. Dispositions are neither natural character traits nor simple matters of circumstance (either “he’s just born happy” or “if I had what she has I’d be happy too”) but what make certain epistemologies feel right, even necessary. The fact that dispositions change, often en masse, suggests that they are historically grounded, as much the product of the times as of the literary texts under scrutiny. To begin to understand—and change—our contemporary critical disposition, then, we should start with its historical sources in the Cold War.

The historian John Lewis Gaddis argues that the Cold War itself was a battle of dispositions in which orientation toward action took the place of action itself. Unlike the world war that proceeded it, which solicited active participation from American civilians (rationing, knitting, factory work, etc.), the Cold War required little except dispositions that could be manipulated for what Gaddis calls “immediate psychological benefits.” Citizens underwent exercises like the “duck and cover” drills in American schools, which produced not a rational reassurance of safety
during nuclear attack but a perpetual state of readiness; citizens were encouraged to understand “politics” not in terms of what the government did or asked them to do but by what dispositions it encouraged them to adopt. Coming of age in that era, early proponents of New Historicism, New Americanism, and other forms of ideology critique not only made their tone a signature feature of literary criticism but turned dispositions into a sign of politics: a critic’s orientation toward politics came to stand in for an explicit articulation of social or political ideals or positions. So entrenched did this substitution become that, as I observed earlier, a challenge to a critic’s disposition is taken as a rejection of her or his politics. Today dispositions of arch knowingness, breathless outrage, or detached condescension render unnecessary any clearly articulated political commitment, being a dispositional sign that a critic is ready for engagement, even when none ensues.

Among the dispositions encouraged in citizens during the Cold War, none was as powerful as suspicion, which became the epistemological center of the Cold War state’s authority. In the Cold War United States, government leaders taught Americans that communists—and their equivalent, homosexuals—could be anywhere, even among friends and family. A citizen’s duty was to sniff them out, report them, and feel proud to be an agent in freedom’s security, without investigating or imagining alternatives to the imperative logics underlying definitions of “freedom.” Convincing citizens that dangerous ideological agents lurked behind surface innocence, the state made suspicion a national disposition. Suspicion thus operated as the dispositional entrance into what Donald Pease calls a “state fantasy” in large part because its objects, being hidden, were potentially ubiquitous, making the realm of state inquiry inexhaustible and its explanatory capacities total. There was no outside to Cold War suspicion; citizens could adopt it as a patriotic disposition or become its object. The world broke into a clear-cut opposition between abstract political philosophies, as absolute attitudinal differences between smugness and shame, suspicion and furtiveness, schematized what might otherwise have been understood as a complex web of complicities and similarities.

The way its critics characterize “critique”—a suspicious peering below a text’s surface to reveal the unsavory ideologies concealed below, creating absolute and abstract binary oppositions identified by an unim-
plicated (and hence superior) critic—suggests its Cold War origins. If it was almost inevitable that suspicion became a predominant critical disposition for baby boomers raised during the height of the Cold War, what is surprising is that criticism, reproducing the epistemological dispositions of the Cold War state, sustains an identification with the same state whose ideological positions that criticism, in its content, frequently opposes. Long past the Cold War’s end, in other words, critical disposition and content work at cross-purposes, a condition of belatedness that has given some the impression that critique has, in Bruno Latour’s words, run out of steam. By rote reproduction, an already-problematic Cold War disposition has lived on long past its moment, becoming the professionalized combination of suspicion, self-approbation, and indignation that, with a nod to Stephen Colbert, I call critiquiness.

As part of his satire of ultraconservative commentary on the televised Colbert Report, Colbert coined “truthiness” to describe the sound of truthfulness without reference to logic or fact but based solely on what a speaker (usually, for Colbert, a politician) and his or her audience wish to be true. Critiquiness, similarly, names the appearance of critique, of textual politics, that produces expectations about the way the world—and the text—works without reckoning with experiences that vary from or defy those expectations. Like truthiness, with its sanctimonious assertions of facts that seem to prove the ideology that generates them, critiquiness performs self-satisfaction about an agency (an “ideology”) locatable in a text’s “depth” that is a phantasmatic location of the critic’s own beliefs, which, because of their projection onto a text, do not need to be named or defended. Critiquiness, like truthiness, is a disposition that substitutes for the work properly done by the root term (“truth” or “critique”). It is the sound of critique without the ethical positioning, the explicit statement of ideals, and the imaginative presentation of alternatives based on those ideals that critique at its best involves.

Critique’s optimal disposition is available to us, of course, but it requires deliberate practice, an ongoing movement toward what Jane Bennett describes as “a feeling of being connected in an affirmative way to existence.” For Bennett this process, akin to what Michel Foucault calls “the care of the self,” requires three stages: “a set of exercises . . . to install the ethical code on the body; a rationale for obedience to ethical principles and exercises; and an ideal of the self to which the ethical
person aspires.” These terms offer a template for literary critics whose intensive focus on their object of study can preclude an equally rigorous analysis of their own dispositions. “Exercise” suggests sustained attention to the ethical positions associated with continuous study of literature, taking seriously the effects of literature on ethics and not just the other way around. The second step—rationale—is even more important: as Latour observes, the stale predictability of much recent scholarly critique arises from its lack of self-analysis and its unwillingness to justify disciplinary doxa. Finally, “an ideal of the self” may expand to include ideals for the world in and around literature and literary criticism, making dispositional “care” into a practice of hope. Such a process potentially enables greater freedom of speculation, more willingness to locate social engagement in places other than in abstract ideological agencies, renewed faith in the imaginative and unempirical, and deeper respect for the cultural seriousness of seemingly fanciful forms that articulate the not-yetness of social experiences vying for public credibility. It would mean understanding critique as a practice of hope.

The following chapters take up a number of mid-twentieth-century American writers on canonic American literature—Granville Hicks, Constance Rourke, Richard Chase, Newton Arvin, Charles Feidelson, Marius Bewley, and Richard Poirier, as well as R. W. B. Lewis, F. O. Matthiessen, C. L. R. James, and Lewis Mumford—who, across the period running from the Great Depression through the first decades of the Cold War to the conflict in Vietnam, wrote criticism advocating for the imaginative idealism of hope. Most of those critics are forgotten or ignored today, or, when they are recalled, they are disparaged as Cold War nationalists of the “myth and symbol” variety. The following chapters will argue, however, that together they form a valuable past for critical practices of hope today. Here one example, drawn from the end of the period under consideration, will suggest the trajectory of the history I trace.

In 1963, the young Indian scholar A. N. Kaul published his prizewinning Yale dissertation as *The American Vision: Actual and Ideal Society in Nineteenth-Century Fiction*. Kaul urged readers to move beyond inevitable reality to embrace the world-making capabilities of the social imagination. There “is a way of regarding social reality,” Kaul writes,
“which takes into account not only observable social facts but also various aspects of imaginative response to these facts; which considers such things as ideals, or mythic archetypes of thought, to be important if not readily visible components of that reality.” For Kaul, critique is not political in the common sense, since it does not suggest “even to the most sanguine mind anything more than a possibility, a suggestion of potential reality.” Yet that “possibility” is not without social consequences. While “practical men battled over new political and economic institutions,” Kaul writes, nineteenth-century authors sought “the moral values necessary for the regeneration of human society,” a search that brought them repeatedly to “the theme of ideal community life.” Criticism that neglects the value of such “potential realities” limits itself to what Kaul calls “a mere instrumentality.” In contrast, he refers to William James, who understood that an effective social theory would involve “a critical attitude toward the actual society of the time on the one hand and a constant preoccupation with ideal community life on the other.” It is this combination that I identify as the practice of hope.

The hardest question one could ask of nineteenth-century American authors, which is also the toughest posed to those advancing the new “mood” in literary criticism today, is, as Kaul knew, “whether they can be said to possess any relevance to that culture’s present reality.” The answer, he also knew, is yes, especially because in generating his vision of the good society, the nineteenth-century author “had to depart more radically from the imitation of existing reality and rely more heavily instead on the plastic power of his imagination.” That imagination, Kaul observes, was uniquely capable of undertaking, as Mark Twain did, “the exploration of a possibility which is totally denied in the world of actuality.” Kaul therefore favored Romantic authors, who produced a “body of literature that sought not only to represent the existing social order, but also to confront it with the image of an ideal society.” Those authors did not shy away from social critique, but they went beyond to picture the social ideals that motivated their judgments. According to Kaul, they “confronted the society of the time, critically evaluating it and at the same time tending away from it to project, in their distinctive ways, the image of an ideal community or an ideal social order.” In that way, Kaul believed, “the actual and the ideal function in a mutual critique.” In what Kaul calls “critical times,” imaginative ideals be-
came especially important to Romantic authors not because they were “less concerned with the perfection of human society” but “because they were more so.” By imagining worlds “out-of-place and out-of-time for the period,” they gave shape to “a set of values for relationship between individuals,” turning flights of fancy into a hopeful social ethics.

Such imaginative idealism, Kaul argues, is central to literature’s “continuing vitality.” But it is just as important as a reading practice. The plots of Romantic literature, although obviously “not fictional transcripts from existing reality,” he insists, “can be called unreal only if by reality we mean the status quo.” Yet the social significance of a Romantic plot remains unrecognized, Kaul claims, when a reader “finds it implausible, or, alternatively, recogniz[es] it as something that could not have happened” and therefore “takes it as a dream or a romance and concludes that it can have no possible relevance to real life and its issues.” Kaul recognizes the unlikelihood that in his own era “many persons would even remotely entertain such large-scale ideals as the earlier imagination delighted in” and laments that intellectuals in particular “still prefer bearing the weight of the old philosopher’s displeasure to facing the uncertain risk of believing in the imminence of paradise.” But Kaul also asserts that it “is the fact of paramount importance for the literary critic” that “if there is no place for [Romanticism’s idealism] in the given theory of the novel, the task of criticism should be to revise the established assumptions in order to accommodate the new achievement, and not the other way round.”

To underscore the need for imaginative idealism in critical reading, Kaul concludes with some challenging questions still relevant today: “Is it not erroneous,” he inquires, “to suppose that social ideals of such scope can have no relevance to the problems of existing reality? Because history defeated their hopes, is it fair to conclude that it also discredited them irrevocably? Did history not rather discredit itself in the process, and does not America need today, perhaps more than ever before, great myths and visions with which to support history and perhaps even shape it?” Kaul clearly believed America did need those myths and visions, and that literary criticism could create and popularize them as a sustained and vital practice of hope.

When Kaul was writing *The American Vision* in the early 1960s, there were ample reasons to be disenchanted. It was a time when the Berlin Wall, erected in 1961, gave material form to the ideological standoff be-
tween the Soviet Union and the United States. In 1962, China attacked Kaul’s native India. And evidence of Soviet arms installations off the coast of Florida began what became known as the Cuban Missile Crisis. As the book went to press in 1963, hostilities escalated between China and the Soviet Union; British defense minister John Profumo was charged with leaking classified information to the Kremlin; American newspapers printed photographs of self-immolating South Vietnamese Buddhist monks; 16,300 American troops were stationed in Vietnam; and in November both U.S. president John F. Kennedy and South Vietnamese prime minister Ngo Dinh Diem were assassinated, the latter with support from the CIA. Meanwhile, race relations in the United States were explosively tense. In 1963, civil rights activist Medgar Evans was killed in Mississippi; the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, was bombed, killing four girls; and Martin Luther King Jr. was arrested protesting that bombing, resulting in his famous “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” In August of that year, 25,000 people marched in Washington, DC, and heard King deliver the “I Have a Dream” speech. Publishing about hope and idealism at such a moment might seem quixotic, even irresponsible. Faced with the grave social conditions of the Cold War, literary critics, like the Romantic authors they admired, were vulnerable to, in Kaul’s words, “the charge of being escapists, allegorists, day-dreamers, wishful thinkers, fantasy-mongers, romancers.”68 My argument in this book, however, is that the opposite is true: by turning to practices of hope, critics like Kaul developed the pertinent criticism for disenchanted times not by providing an escape from harsh realities but by refusing to let the suspicion, conformity, and techno-practicality vanquish what they perceived as the motivation and finest form of resistance and resilience in American literature.

In the chapters to follow, I turn to critics, as they turned to Hawthorne and Melville, to form a “usable past” for a critical practice of hope. I choose these critics for several reasons. First, I am struck by how profoundly disenchanted their times were. Writing in the period between the end of the Second World War and the antiwar movement of the mid-1960s, critics such as Rourke, Chase, Poirier, and Kaul show that critical hopefulness has a particularly social efficacy in countering the dominant social beliefs that generate disenchantment. They do so, moreover, by showing how critique and idealism operate simultaneously
to the mutual critical benefit of both. In addition to seeing those critics as instantiations of a coherent critical legacy, however, I will analyze how they mark distinctive moments in a series of imaginative translations. Beginning with 1930s critics Granville Hicks and Constance Rourke and continuing through to the scholars of literary symbolism and style Marius Bewley and Richard Poirier, the following chapters explore evolving understandings of the relationship of texts to society in the changing historical contexts. The years between Hicks and Poirier did not occasion a turn away from socialist politics toward something more apolitical or supportive of the Cold War consensus. Rather, they created a concept of literature that demonstrates an increased awareness of the function of imagination, idealism, and literary “worlds elsewhere” in maintaining resilience and motivating hopeful reconstructions in a world that seems to offer or to tolerate nothing but what already is. Each of the following chapters focuses on a word—“nation,” “liberalism,” “humanism,” “symbolism”—that characterizes an episode in that series of translations.

These words draw a good deal of suspicion in literary criticism today, and that is part of why I chose them. My goal is not to antagonize but to demonstrate that the same concepts adopted from different critical dispositions can produce very divergent results from the valences they are widely assigned today. In other moments in the history of criticism, these terms became empty signifiers, which imaginative critics filled with social possibilities. My aim in turning to the critics discussed in the following chapters is to contend that those possibilities are still available to literary criticism, that we are another stage in a developing (although not necessarily progressive) tradition and not the other side of a divide as extreme as that which characterized Cold War political antagonisms. The Cold War past, in short, can be our way out of its melancholy reproduction as critical disenchantment, making it again the visionary force Kaul, like the other critics examined here, knew it could be.

Cold War critics have become, in Matthew Frankel’s words, “a bit of an embarrassment,” their belief in “imaginative vitality” considered “analytically vague and . . . politically suspect.” 69 This embarrassment stems in large part from midcentury criticism’s focus on myths and symbols, often taken as proof of the critics’ support for the Cold War
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consensus. Such assessments overlook, however, the explicit critiques these critics set forth as the nuclear arms race escalated and Senator Joseph McCarthy’s House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) wielded tyrannical power. In 1950, Lionel Trilling protested “the proliferation of government by police methods,” generating among citizens “the ideal of mere security.”70 Condemning Cold War conformity, R. W. B. Lewis in 1955 opposed a chauvinistic culture that valorized the rigid social normativity, rampant militarism, and xenophobic self-policing of McCarthyism. “Ours is an age of containment,” Lewis lamented; “we huddle together and shore up defenses.”71 In Cold War America, Lewis believed, “a sterile awareness of evil uninvigorated by a sense of loss” produced “the expressed belief in achieved hopelessness.”72 Lewis Mumford agreed, arguing that the hardheaded practicality and gray-flannel-suit conventionality of Cold War America had made mandatory what he names “every kind of cowed conformity.”73 Mumford’s critique was especially aimed at the science that precipitated the nuclear arms race. Looking back in 1956–1957, in a preface to the thirtieth anniversary reprinting of his study The Golden Day, Mumford laments undervaluing Henry Adams’s warnings about the “disintegration of Western Civilization”74 that would result from scientific innovations. “Long before the scientists concerned were sufficiently roused from their sleep-walking routines to realize what they were in fact doing,” Mumford writes, Adams “saw, if they did not, that the train of events set in motion by the accidental discovery of the Becquerel rays would, in time, threaten the structure of civilization, making ‘morality become police’ and creating bombs of ‘cosmic violence.’”75 Reassessing Adams in the context of the Cold War, Mumford praises his capacity to attest “to the meaning of the present crisis in world civilization,”76 through “the clairvoyance, as well as the scholarly historic insight, of his foreboding mind.”77 Mumford echoes Newton Arvin, who in 1950 claimed in his reading of Adams, “I firmly believe that before many centuries more, science will be the master of man. The engines he will have invented will be beyond his strength to control. Some day science may have the existence of mankind in its power, and the human race commit suicide by blowing up the world.”78

Far from endorsing a conservative consensus, Trilling, Lewis, Mumford, and Arvin parallel the writing of one of the few midcentury critics credited with political acuity, C. L. R. James. Lewis’s concern about a
“world civilization” imperiled by the barbarism arising from the contradiction between ideals and state practice echoes James’s *American Civilization*, originally composed in 1950, in which he asserts that “the bureaucratization and centralization of social life” had brought about “a state of hopelessness” and had poisoned American ideals.  

James wrote:

> Liberty, freedom, pursuit of happiness, free individuality had an actuality and a meaning in America which they had nowhere else. The European wrote and theorized about freedom in superb writings. Americans lived it. That tradition is the most vital tradition in the country today. Any idea that it is merely a tradition, used by unscrupulous July 4 politicians to deceive the people, destroys any possibility of understanding the crisis in America today. The essential conflict is between these ideals, hopes, aspirations, needs, which are still the essential part of the tradition, and the economic and social realities of present-day America.

James’s defense of the principles of American nationhood is all the more remarkable in light of his inhumane imprisonment by “unscrupulous July 4 politicians.” Like his contemporaries, however, James *used* those explicitly stated ideals as the basis of stringent critique of their betrayal, not in order to abandon idealism itself.

James and his contemporaries sound even more similar when they offer a vision of the literary imagination as a space of social engagement and a practice of hope. Mumford makes a claim for “the importance of the poet and the artist and the thinker, as a counterbalance to the over-valuation of . . . a civilization plainly threatened by barbarism from within.” To counter this barbarism, Lewis argued for “the moral and artistic possibilities of a century ago,” exemplified by the Romantic writers he admired. Like Mumford and Lewis, James gleaned his idealism from Romantic literature in general and Melville in particular. Melville’s “clear vision of the future,” James writes, taught him the possibilities generated by the literary imagination. Melville’s association of outsiders—mariners, renegades, and castaways—with imagination shaped James’s assessment of historical figures such as Toussaint Louverture, leader of the revolutionary insurrection in Haiti. In *The Black Jacobins*, James writes, “Firm as was his grasp of reality, old Toussaint looked beyond San Domingo with a boldness of imagination surpassed by no
contemporary. That “boldness of imagination” allowed Louverture to see Haiti as it might be, a not-yet Haiti, that turned simmering resentment into a revolutionary movement not only against racialized subjugation but also toward an imagined outcome of revolutionary hope.

James’s understanding of the role of imagination in shaping revolutionary ideals is too often ignored in favor of his explicit political analysis, despite the fact that James saw the two as intrinsically related. The same combination of imaginative idealism and social critique is overlooked in critics like Mumford and Lewis, but for the corollary reason: their focus on literary myth renders their criticism, as Frankel observes, “politically suspect.” Yet Lewis in particular was an ardent proponent of literature in general and myths in particular as incentives to progressive social change. He understood myth as an aesthetic means for generating a deliberative and self-transforming culture. In American Adam (1955), Lewis, introducing his eponymous mythic “figure of heroic innocence and vast potentialities, poised at the start of a new history,” might seem to be celebrating Cold War America’s self-image as both “innocent” of ideological intentions and “heroic” in its exceptionalist efforts to safeguard the globe. Yet Lewis observes that any such myth is “crowded with illusion, and the moral posture it seemed to indorse was vulnerable in the extreme.” Lewis thus sees myth as imbuing the “moral posture” his myth seems to praise with an “openness to challenge” and a “susceptibility to controversy” that make possible what, following Hegel, Lewis describes as “the unfolding course of a dialogue . . . containing a number of voices.” Myth is thus “a collective affair” built not on unity or consensus but on contestation, or what Lewis describes as a “determining debate” that “may be said to be the culture.” For Lewis, then, myth is a form of critique, showing how a culture “achieves identity not so much through the ascendency of one particular set of convictions” but through “the sometimes bruising contact of opposites.” But myth is also, for Lewis, a practice of hope, providing what Laclau calls “empty signifiers.” Invoking values that bring a collective together not “simply to settle the terms of discussion” but rather “to provide materials for the creative imagination,” myth offers “a comprehensive view of life, in an ideal extension of its present possibilities.”

For other critics, such as Richard Chase, discussed in the second chapter, myth was also politicized but in ways that mark a significant
change from the practices of the Marxist critics of the 1920s and 1930s. In that period, critics such as Victor Calverton and Vernon Parrington, who urged criticism beyond “the narrow field of belles letters alone,” believed that myths romanticize an industrial hegemony that separates the masses and diverts their attention from the consolidation of economic power in the Northeast. Believing that Romanticism drew writers away from clearheaded social realism, Parrington upbraided Hawthorne for his “distortions of the soul under the tyranny of a diseased imagination” and for “delocalizing” the material world. Midcentury critics such as Chase, however, found ideological conformity in realist fiction and political promise in Romantic myth. The very characteristics that, for Calverton and Parrington, made myth politically suspect—its emotionalism, eccentricity, and aesthetic distortions—were what, for Chase and many of his contemporaries, made literature most valuable as a socially engaged practice of hope.

For some critics writing during the Cold War, mythology became politicized through its focus on embodied relationality in the form of sexuality, understood less as the basis for individual identity than as the grounds for unexpected cultural alliances. Almost every midcentury critic treated in the following chapters names D. H. Lawrence as a significant—if problematic—influence. Lawrence’s *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923) famously divides the nineteenth-century canon between followers of the head, who were believers in self-improvement and rational reform, and disciples of the heart and of the erotic unconscious. Favoring the latter, Lawrence opposes textual expressions of the mundane conventionalities of everyday life. Desire, fantasy, affective excess, and unchecked eroticism—these for Lawrence distinguish the greatest American novels. What proved troublesome for Lawrence—hardly surprising to readers of his fiction—was the common association of the unconscious with homoeroticism. In defensive response, Lawrence counterintuitively consigns homosexuality to the realm of conventional experience, thereby removing it from what he claims was most inventive and honest about American literature. In relation to Melville, whom midcentury critics would celebrate for his expressions of same-sex intimacy, Lawrence writes that his “desire for a ‘perfect relationship’ is just a vicious, unmanly craving,” and, as he writes of Hawthorne, “we ought to decide to have done at last with craving.”
When midcentury critics took up Lawrence, they accepted his opposition between head and heart, convention and the unconscious, but they reversed his judgments. For them, homosexuality is a critical force opposed to convention and, as a form of social contestation, bridges the gap between the individual unconscious and a politically conscious collective idealism. Homosexuality counters conventions associated with what F. O. Matthiessen calls the “mechanization” of modern society, threatening the “wholeness” of man and leading to the “neurotic strain” in modern life, while for Arvin it represents the “strong intuition of human solidarity as a priceless good,” opposed to the “brutality of indiscriminate skepticism.”

Whether in Richard Poirier’s reference to the “sexually irregular,” Chase’s to the love of comrades, or Mumford’s to imaginative possibilities “concentrated on relationships and values” that are “somehow illicit,” homosexuality became, as the third chapter will show, a form of socialist humanism and shaped the symbolist aesthetics of the critics discussed in the final chapter. At a time when homosexuals were reviled in clinical, legal, and political discourse, these critics, making homosexuality the political heart of their mythologies, put it at the center of the emerging field of American literary studies.

The alternative socialities forged through sexuality characterize midcentury criticism’s fascination with the broader unpredictable alliances made among the scapegoats of Cold War ideology, figures that Mumford, echoing James, called “outcasts, recluses, exiles.” In *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (1957), Chase aligns “aesthetic possibilities” with the “extreme range of experiences” characteristic of those who live “radical forms of alienation, contradiction, and disorder.” Within “the borderland of the human mind where the actual and the imaginary intermingle,” Chase writes, those outcasts enjoy the “blissful, idyllic, erotic attachment to life and to one’s comrades, which is the only promise of happiness.” As with Chase’s “extreme experiences,” for Poirier the habitués of his “world elsewhere” represent “an exercise of consciousness momentarily set free,” a condition enjoyed by “the foolish, the preposterous, and the sexually irregular.”

Restricted within a boundaried “consciousness” that was the interior equivalent of the defensively bordered nation, the citizen of the world of imagination becomes “a law unto himself,” ignoring “all outward allegiance, whether to nature or society.” These outcasts experience what Lionel Trilling called the “lively sense of
contingency and possibility, and of those exceptions to the rule which may be the beginning of the end of the rule.”\textsuperscript{103} The kind of “sense” Trilling had in mind became his own critical ideal, what he called simply “the imagination of love.”\textsuperscript{104}

For the critics discussed in the following chapters, visions such as Chase’s, Trilling’s, and Poirier’s were refusals of disenchantment, or what Lewis calls the “new hopelessness” that, he claims, “is, paradoxically, as simple-minded as innocence.”\textsuperscript{105} Like his contemporaries discussed here, Lewis knew that we cannot abandon critique, which “contains many remarkable and even irreversible psychological, sociological, and political insights” amounting to “the picture most clearly warranted by public and private experience in our time.” But he also knew that the disenchanted criticism in his day seemed “curiously frozen in outline,” offering “no opposite possibilities on which to feed and fatten.”\textsuperscript{106} That nourishment, for Lewis, was still possible in literature and literary criticism, which, he claims, “can pose anew, in the classic way of illumination as it did in the American nineteenth century, the picture of what might be against the knowledge of what is.”\textsuperscript{107} A criticism that uses imaginative idealism to confront “what is” with “what might be” is a practice of hope. But its “illumination” is dimmed when “a habit of forgetfulness” leads to “the sheer dullness of unconscious repetition.”\textsuperscript{108}

We have largely forgotten—or diminished—our critical past, and the result is the “unconscious repetition” of a malnourished critique. But we might reencounter the past and once again begin to think the no longer thinkable. When midcentury critics turned to Melville and Whitman, they sought a revival not only of the nineteenth-century past but also of the living possibilities available to them as critics. As Mumford acknowledges, “It was precisely my sense of the present promise that made the past so vividly alive to me.”\textsuperscript{109} Mumford anticipates Michael Taussig’s claim that “an incandescent present” requires the survival of the past in order to generate “a space of no time” and “dismantle the institutions of the present and then presumably build them anew.”\textsuperscript{110} Just as midcentury critics looked back a century for an “incandescent present,” so might we look to our critical past to find an alternative to exhausted critique, refusing, in Bruno Latour’s words, to let “a prestigious critical tradition . . . die away.”\textsuperscript{111} In what Rita Felski calls “the current climate of retrospection,” as we “reassess methods of reading
that have come to seem stale and unsurprising,” we might reassess the dispositions shaped by critics who offer remarkably unsuspicious critiques centered on the socially transformative power that Chase calls the moral imagination. In so doing, we, too, might come to seem less “stale and unsurprising.”

In 1955, R. W. B. Lewis claimed, “We stand in need of more stirring impulsions, of greater perspectives and more penetrating controversies,” invigorating the sense of “unbounded possibility.” The answer was certainly not to be found in the version of critique described four years later by Newton Arvin, who wrote, “We hug our negations, our doubts, our disbeliefs to our chests, as if our moral and intellectual dignity depended on them.” Even earlier, Van Wyck Brooks inquired, “Where are we going to get the new ideals, the finer attitudes, that we must get if we are ever to emerge from our existing travesty of a civilization?” Their frustration can be heard again in our “postcritique” moment. And just as their exasperation led to remarkable acts of critical creativity, so the conversations today enabled by the empty signifier “critique” should be an exhilarating possibility, not a melancholy loss. We again have an opportunity to redefine critique, infusing it with the imagination and idealism that, in Arvin’s words, are “accessible as always to those who wish not merely to ‘interpret the world variously’ (in Marx’s phrase) but to change it.” If the “greater impulsions” called for by Lewis and the “finer attitudes” Brooks desired are, for us, “unbounded possibilities,” then we can make critique, as they did, less a disenchantment tale and more a practice of hope.