

# van wyck brooks and the progressive frame of mind

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It has long been recognized that Van Wyck Brooks's *America's Coming-of-Age* (1915) and its companion piece *Letters and Leadership* (1918) captured the insurgent mood of a young generation of intellectuals who themselves came of age with an outburst of critical and artistic activity in the years just prior to America's entry into World War I.<sup>1</sup> To those of his contemporaries espousing a literature in touch with the wellsprings of modern American life, Brooks gave, as one of them put it, "an afflatus inchoate, vague, sentimental," but one that brought vital energy and creative focus to their cause.<sup>2</sup> Although his demand for a truly national literature growing out of a healthy national culture was hardly new, harking back to Emerson and Whitman among others, Brooks's vigorous restatement of this theme expressed particularly the concerns of the present moment: a belief in self-expression as an ideal of personal growth and the basis for a flourishing artistic tradition; a sense of social responsibility, often tinged by some form of political radicalism; an emphasis on freedom, experiment and creativity in all phases of the national life, and especially a youthful rejection of all that smacked of the "old America." The diverse ideas and interests of Randolph Bourne, Floyd Dell, Max Eastman, Waldo Frank, Walter Lippmann, John Reed, Paul Rosenfeld and Harold Stearns, to name but a few, indelibly stamped what Brooks called "the newness." Having come into their own at the high-water mark of the Progressive era, these young men felt that the current reform agitation had fallen far short of creating a new social and cultural order. For all its iconoclasm, however, the rebellion of the young, as Henry May has shown, had a great deal in common, both in outlook and in spirit, with "the dominant American culture it condemned."<sup>3</sup> If *America's Coming-of-Age* and *Letters and Leadership* voiced the younger generation's repudiation of the established culture

and their desire to turn the reform impulse into a crusade for cultural and artistic regeneration, much of what Brooks had to say was not as radical a departure from Progressive thought as his sense of a break with the old order made it seem. Many of his specific ideas as well as the general tenor of his thinking bespoke the Progressive frame of mind.

Brooks and his contemporaries had grown up amid the critical attitude toward present conditions, the sense of urgency in the face of social and intellectual upheaval, the idealism and moral fervor that had characterized the national temper since the last years of the nineteenth century—tendencies plainly evident in Brooks's writings. The elastic label "Progressive," of course, covers a very mixed bag of adherents to populistic democracy, advocates for the greater rationalization of business and industry, pragmatic social planners and proponents of a humanitarian social gospel; but, broadly speaking, the prevailing climate of reform arose through the interaction of two different levels of thought.<sup>4</sup> Average citizens and their political spokesmen generally wanted to bring the forces of social and economic change in line with traditional ideals. This popular brand of Progressivism with its concern over corruption in government, the evils of the Trusts and the protection of "the little man" was the target of the young when they attacked reform-mindedness for its failure to treat real issues or generate fundamental changes. Simultaneously, various scholars and social thinkers were advancing a more sophisticated and far-reaching ideology of reform, demonstrating that the so-called "established truths" in many fields were the products of conditions that were not timeless, and justifying the reform impulse by stressing man's creative role in the evolutionary process. Many of these intellectuals were also deeply dissatisfied with the popular ideal of reform and the established American values it embodied.

While young men like Brooks repeatedly stated their general disaffection from what Bourne called "this older generation," they were nonetheless in close sympathy with many of the innovative methods and insights put forward by the more radically inclined Progressives: Charles Beard's economic interpretation of history; Lincoln Steffens' probing analyses of the actual operations of the political "system," permeated by his skepticism toward conventional reform; Thorstein Veblen's contrast between the instinct of workmanship and the profit motive; Herbert Croly's program for a national culture. *America's Coming-of-Age* and *Letters and Leadership* reflected diverse elements in the thinking of such older reformers. What gave the two books their aura of newness was Brooks's particular adaptation of these ideas in bringing them to bear on a reading of America's literary history, and the particular mood that suffused his analysis—a combination of a heady rebelliousness toward present American life and a firm conviction that a new cultural era was imminent.

Brooks found his audience particularly among the young intellectuals who shared his mood. His contacts with other dissidents gave him the sense of participating in a common effort, and the reactions of his contemporaries to his two volumes show that the note he struck sounded a responsive chord. He met Walter Lippmann in England in 1913 and discovered they shared both the desire for a radical change in American life and the belief that literature would play a crucial role toward that end. When *America's Coming-of-Age* appeared, Lippmann hailed it as criticism that "glowed with a sense of life" and "a feeling for values," and noted that Brooks had not affirmed fully enough that "the revelation is here, a living thing . . . in the very positive aspirations which inspire the destructive comment of his own book." Brooks formed a close friendship with Randolph Bourne, whose prewar writings on literature, education, youth and trans-national culture typified the young radicals' range of interests and their rebellious hopefulness. In March, 1918, Bourne wrote Brooks that *Letters and Leadership* was "a prelude, a clearing of the ground, for [the] magnificently constructive enterprise of creating a new literary leadership." When Brooks became an associate editor of the *Seven Arts* in the company of such kindred minds as Bourne, Waldo Frank, Paul Rosenfeld, James Oppenheim and Louis Untermeyer, the magazine designated him "a creative power in criticism . . . a wedge behind which the new forces in our arts may advance." Frank, Rosenfeld and Harold Stearns all later assessed Brooks's central importance to the critical awakening in which they were mutually engaged. Rosenfeld credited Brooks with providing his fellow critics with a broad but coherent "analytical scheme of the past," and found his vision "second in pregnancy for the nation to scarcely another seen since Whitman died." Even less favorably disposed critics like Stuart Pratt Sherman identified Brooks with the rebellious movement: "Mr. Brooks is one of the young intellectuals who are just now so busy multiplying expressions of their dissatisfaction with American society."<sup>5</sup>

Brooks's appeal to his contemporaries stemmed from the way he fused the Progressive reform consciousness and the growing concern over the state of the arts in America by putting literature at the center of reform. In attempting to lay the groundwork for a living literary tradition by elucidating why America had so far not produced one, Brooks drew upon various strands of political, social and cultural thought within the intellectual milieu of the reform era. His efforts to unite literary and social criticism bore certain resemblances to the broadly cultural critiques made earlier by George Santayana, an aloof and often amused observer of the Progressive scene, and John Jay Chapman, whose extreme individualism and radical moral idealism set him apart from other intellectual spokesmen for reform. Brooks's notion of the split in the American mind between "highbrow" and "lowbrow," between the lofty idealism of the American intellect and the practical

conduct of life, paralleled Santayana's description of America as "a country with two mentalities"—the one "all genteel tradition," the other "all aggressive enterprise."<sup>6</sup> But in his argument that this dualism preserved a single-minded devotion to money-making as the motive power of American civilization, Brooks was closer to Chapman. The latter's *Causes and Consequences* (1898) and *Practical Agitation* (1900) had viewed the problem of political reform within its larger cultural context; together with his essay on Emerson (1898), they vigorously portrayed the debilitating effect of commercialism on the intellectual, creative and spiritual dimensions of American life. Chapman's works preceded the flood of muckraking and reform literature more typical of Progressivism, which created a national awareness of the forces shaping an industrial and urban America. This outpouring left its mark not simply on Brooks's comments on reform and his demand that literature confront the energies at work in modern America, but also on the cast of mind that colored his writings. He later said of the "national self-scrutiny" undertaken by his generation that it was "as if the impulse of the 'muckrakers' had spread beyond the political sphere and invaded every corner of American living and thinking."<sup>7</sup> Brooks in effect made the Progressive social consciousness itself the cornerstone of a national rebirth in spirit—the sense of common experience and communal standards prerequisite to a healthy cultural life: "To leave behind the old Yankee self-assertion and self-sufficiency, to work together, think together, feel together . . . —all that is certainly in the right direction" (*AC*, 180). He thus shifted the emphasis of reform from a predominantly political and institutional orientation to a cultural and spiritual one. This emphasis directly corresponded to what most of his contemporaries felt was missing from current reform, but at the same time it put Brooks in the company of Chapman and Herbert Croly who, in varying degrees, had voiced the same theme for different audiences.

Brooks's break with the older generation was forcibly expressed in his condemnation of the popular reform ideal. The goal of the present reform philosophy, as he saw it, was "the attainment of zero." It hoped simply to cancel out the power of big business, and not essentially to reshape society. Cleansing politics mattered little so long as "the real forces of the people" could not be engaged politically because the issues behind politics remained unarticulated (*AC*, 30, 178). Other young intellectuals similarly objected to the traditional context of reform. At best, they felt it offered little more than a welcome catharsis for the sense of guilt that rankled in the conscience of middle-class America; the older generation, said Bourne, wanted "all the luxury of the virtue of goodness" and "all the advantages of being in a vicious society." Lippmann's *A Preface to Politics* combined a call for new approaches with a trenchant critique of the "routinier" reform psychology which championed "good government" and "self-government" as ends in them-

selves rather than envisioning government as a means to enhance life.<sup>8</sup> Brooks and his contemporaries agreed that efforts to patch up politics and restore the older American democracy only reinforced all that was wrong with the existing order.

Brooks's criticisms were indebted, however, to certain older reformers. Seeing "reconstruction" and not "restoration" as the proper end of reform, Croly emphasized that moral protest must be "accompanied by a masterful and jubilant intellectual awakening."<sup>9</sup> Jane Addams and Lincoln Steffens continually exposed the mistaken assumption of conventional reform that the only way to better America was to raise its less reputable elements up to the level of its best elements as defined by middle-class, Protestant standards. In the same vein, Brooks attacked the spirit of "uplift" as a manifestation of the "highbrow" mentality. His comment that Good Government could learn much from Tammany derived from Steffens' contention that Tammany had the loyalty of the immigrant poor because it satisfied certain of their real and immediate wants and needs which the average reformer neglected.<sup>10</sup> Brooks put this insight in broader context as a typical illustration of the crippling dichotomy in the American mind. It was clear

. . . that the mere idealism of university ethics, the mere loftiness of what is called culture, the mere purity of so-called Good Government, left to themselves, not only produce a glassy inflexible priggishness on the upper levels which paralyzes life; but that the lower levels have a certain humanity, flexibility, tangibility which are indispensable in any programme: that Tammany has quite as much to teach Good Government as Good Government has to teach Tammany, that slang has quite as much in store for so-called culture as culture has for slang. . . . (*AC*, 29)

Any sort of meaningful reform would have to utilize constructively the supposedly lower aspects of life, which answered to human needs and impulses denied at the higher level.

The popular will to reform, Brooks felt, in no way touched the real source of the nation's trouble—the business ethos that dominated American culture. The outcry against big business and the Trusts sprang from the same state of mind that had produced the present disorder. This mentality, which viewed economic self-assertion as a moral imperative and self-fulfillment as "a pretty word for selfishness," was wholly inimical to creative personal and national growth: "You cannot have personality, you cannot have the expressions of personality so long as the end of society is an impersonal end like the accumulation of money" (*AC*, 30, 32, 33). Brooks's diagnosis again had Progressive antecedents which reflected the widespread dissatisfaction among intellectuals with the effects of business on American life. In his study of Emerson, Chapman observed that the general lack of personal force and

originality in the literature of Emerson's day—the imitativeness, conservatism and timidity which were the result of provincial dependency and the threat of disunion posed by the slavery issue—had been intensified after the Civil War by “our commercial civilization.”<sup>11</sup> Chapman and Steffens each analyzed the subversion of democratic government by an alliance between politics and business, and concluded that “the system” was not an isolated phenomenon, as reformers often assumed, but was symptomatic of a more fundamental cultural failing. Both men believed the pernicious effects of an all-pervasive commercial spirit extended beyond politics to every phase of American experience.<sup>12</sup> The condition of government similarly expressed for Brooks the inner condition of the American people. Because Americans treated government with a high-flown patriotism devoid of any concrete interest in public affairs, the “invisible government” of business, as reformers loved to call it, had swept into power; likewise, because the individual citizen cherished ideals “that are simply unmapped regions to which nobody has the least intention of building roads,” the “invisible government of self-interest” had filled the inner vacuum a disinterested purpose ought to occupy (*AC*, 28).

The idea that a disinterested spirit was abroad in the land was a prominent theme of popular reform. As William Allen White described it, a feeling of “altruism” challenged the force of “egotism” in the hearts of the people.

And so with all our reforming of conditions about us, by the millions and millions we are first of all reforming ourselves. We are promoting democracy by forgetting ourselves in the thought of others. This self-abnegation is the greatest movement in our national life. And at bottom all this desire to heal our souls is but the prick of the national conscience.<sup>13</sup>

Brooks, by contrast, pinned the disinterested ideal not to “self-abnegation” but to self-fulfillment. The tragic irony of American life was that, for lack of any other outlets, business had absorbed the creative, moral and idealistic elements in the American character with the result that the mind of the nation was given over, “in a potentially disinterested mood, to an essentially self-interested activity.” Only the substitution of a creative and public ideal of personal fulfillment could release the sense of a community of interest, fostered by “intimate feeling, intimate intellectual contact, even humor,” which characterized the “right, free, disinterested” spirit of the true craftsman or civil servant (*AC*, 150, 180).

The shift in attitude between White and Brooks illustrates how the outlook of the younger generation evolved within the context of Progressive thought. “The prick of the national conscience” primarily motivated White’s “New Citizen” to sacrifice his particular interests to a disinterested appraisal of the needs of the community. The muckrakers

sought to kindle this same public spiritedness. Ray Stannard Baker hoped that the presentation of “the ugly facts, the complete picture, the truth, vividly and dispassionately set forth,” would stir honest men to action. Even Steffens, skeptical as he was of traditional moralism, could write that America would have reform “when we are all willing to make sacrifices for the sake of our country and our self-respect.”<sup>14</sup> A similar appeal marked Chapman’s demand that Americans cultivate the natural unselfishness of man to combat the “temporary distortion of human character by the forces of commerce,” but he went further and saw this disinterested commitment as the essence of true individuality, intellectual growth and artistic expression: “Action, art, intellect, unselfishness, are they not one thing?”<sup>15</sup> Herbert Croly, while stressing the need for “individual subordination and self-denial” in the economic sphere, made the pursuit of excellence in one’s individual work the basis for disinterestedness.<sup>16</sup> The connection Chapman and Croly drew between individual development and a disinterested purpose pointed the way to the young intellectuals’ equation of disinterestedness with self-fulfillment and creative endeavor instead of self-discipline and self-denial. When the individual had genuinely creative alternatives to money-making, the appeal to conscience became unnecessary. “You don’t have to preach honesty,” noted Lippmann, “to men with a creative purpose.”<sup>17</sup> True disinterestedness followed naturally, Brooks believed, from the exercise of one’s creative instincts through literature, science or even industry, because “the working out of one’s own personality, one’s own inventiveness through forms of activity that are directly social” gave the individual a life-interest, at once personal and communal, apart from economic rewards (*AC*, 32).

Brooks explicitly linked his viewpoint with the “quickenning realism” of contemporary thought, and persistently chastised the “unreal” quality of American literature caused by its “disinclination to take a plunge, reckless and complete, . . . into the rudest and grossest actualities” (*AC*, 29, 110-11). A penchant for realism marked most reform journalism and literature as well as the work of the foremost Progressive intellectuals and scholars. In order to change conditions, it was first necessary to see things as they were. Facts, Ray Stannard Baker recalled, “. . . facts piled up to the point of dry certitude, was [*sic*] what the American people then needed and wanted.”<sup>18</sup> The new realism challenged academic formalism on many fronts, and Brooks carried this attack to the professors of literature for their unwillingness to confront the present literary situation. The American academic tradition, he charged, was “colonial in essence, having its home in centers of civilization remote from the springs of a national life which has only of late come into its own consciousness” (*AC*, 4-5; *LL*, 91). Brooks’s revision of the standard view of American literature was in some ways anticipated by John Macy’s *The Spirit of American Literature* (1908), particularly in the pointed

barbs Macy directed at the academic mind and in his complaint that literature had avoided grappling with the realities of American society, but Brooks delivered a much more sweeping polemic against the established literary tradition. While Macy aimed primarily at a balanced evaluation of the best and most representative writers America had produced, Brooks subordinated the treatment of individual writers and works to the development of his thesis concerning the failure of any literature of the first order to arise from the unfavorable American environment. Much in the spirit of the "new history" advocated by James Harvey Robinson and Charles Beard, Brooks set forth a version of the past suited to an assault on the stultifying academic view of American letters. By laying bare the economic factors which stood behind it, Beard removed the Constitution from the aura of abstract reverence that surrounded it, and attempted to get at its real nature and effect in his *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (1913). In like manner, by examining how the nation's literary worthies both reflected and reinforced the dichotomy between America's intellectual and practical life caused by the Puritan temperament and pioneering conditions, Brooks attempted to get at the real nature and effect of American literature.

Much of the new realism centered on the discovery of the underside of American life. The muckrakers' revelations of sordid actualities fed the humanitarian impulses and reforming zeal of the nation. Beyond the indignation aroused by the exposure of specific evils, the concern of reformers with the lower levels of society created a new consciousness not only of the plight of the poor but, more importantly, of their humanity, and led many intellectuals to identify with the lower classes.<sup>19</sup> Here, where various immigrant populations with their unique traditions intermingled, was a vast reservoir of life as yet untapped by the culture at large. Brooks pictured "the old innocent America" as Rip Van Winkle, asleep while a new America took shape under the impetus of "Jews, Lithuanians, Magyars and German socialists" (*AC*, 40-41). The same feeling inspired Bourne to envision a "trans-national America" expressive of the distinctive qualities of all its people, in contrast to the traditional conception of the "melting pot" which recast the immigrant in an "Anglo-Saxon" mold.<sup>20</sup> The attraction of Brooks, Bourne and others to the life of the dispossessed involved, above all, their reaction against middle-class America. They discovered amid poverty and squalor the freshness, spontaneity and vitality they had not found in their own world. Brooks's critical vocabulary conveyed their attitude. Directed at all that the genteel tradition enveloped, his terms of reproach—"delicacy," "refinement," "cleansed," "rarefied"—suggest a desiccated world, while his terms of approbation—"rude," "gross," "muscular," "earthy," "richer juices"—suggest a reality teeming with life.

The urgent appeal in *America's Coming-of-Age* and *Letters and*

*Leadership* for a literature saturated with American realities expressed particularly the intensely nationalistic ardor of Brooks's fellow literary radicals on the *Seven Arts*, who hoped to "mobilize all of our native talent . . . and so scatter broadcast the new Americanism which would naturally have the response of America."<sup>21</sup> These young critics were not alone, however, in their cultural nationalism. Brooks's call for a new national self-consciousness had certain close affinities with the ideas of Herbert Croly. Published in 1909, Croly's *The Promise of American Life* became, in a watered-down form, the text for Rooseveltian Progressivism, while many of Brooks's contemporaries saw it as a new departure in cultural criticism.<sup>22</sup> The development of a national sense of responsibility, Brooks and Croly were both convinced, necessitated a transvaluation of present ideals. Brooks's castigation of the Puritan heritage and Croly's attack on the failings of the Jeffersonian political credo were based on the recognition that habitual modes of thought and action no longer fit American conditions. The two men agreed that the traditional brand of competitive individualism most required revision. Believing that the nation's industrial growth made greater collectivization mandatory, they urged, as did many Progressives, a new, communally-oriented individualism. Through constructive work aimed at accomplishing a collective purpose, Croly claimed, the scope and power of individual action would be enlarged. Brooks found in young America's "gospel of self-expression" the seeds of an individualism that was not "combative" but "cooperative, not opinionative but groping, not sectarian but filled with an intense, confused eagerness to identify itself with the life of the whole people" (*LL*, 58). Both critics wished to replace the current chaos with an integrated national life cohering, in Brooks's words, around "a focal centre." For Croly, this unifying point became the democratic national purpose, with the State serving as the repository of "a morally authoritative sovereign will" through which clashing personal interests would be subordinated to the national interest. For Brooks, the center was to be a new ideal of national character expressed through literature (*AC*, 119-20).<sup>23</sup>

Brooks and Croly, along with others like Steffens and Lippmann, counted on strong leadership from individuals of superior talent and intellect who combined a feeling for the desires and forces at work in the present with a far-seeing and disinterested social vision. "Creative statesmanship," as Lippmann named it, had the dual function of meeting social and cultural change with "deliberate leadership" instead of "blind push," and acting as an inspiration for the nation as a whole.<sup>24</sup> Croly wrote out of the same deep concern that Brooks felt over the dilemma of the artist and the intellectual in America; he traced the conception of *The Promise of American Life* to his disturbance at "the contradiction subsisting between certain aspects of the American democratic tradition and the methods and aspirations which dominate con-

temporary American intellectual work.”<sup>25</sup> Both men aimed at encouraging a cultural atmosphere in which the exceptional individual would recognize his proper function of enhancing the quality of American life. They differed, however, in their conceptions of the new leadership and the process of cultural regeneration. Although Croly believed that the influence of the superior individual in all walks of life had an educational value for the nation over and above whatever practical reforms it might initiate, his extensive treatment of the political and economic reorganization necessary to any social and moral improvement led him to stress leadership in these areas. Croly’s last chapter concluded that reform would not finally be achieved until the spirit of brotherhood animated all of society, but he felt this would come only after “a long and slow process of social reorganization and individual emancipation” was well along.<sup>26</sup> To Brooks, on the other hand, the first concern was the spiritual revolution, of which social reconstruction would be the natural concomitant, and he looked specifically to literature to point the way to national rebirth: “But certainly no true social revolution will ever be possible in America till a race of artists, profound and sincere, have brought us face to face with our own experience and set working in that experience the leaven of the highest culture” (*LL*, 127). Croly saw his ideal leader prefigured in Abraham Lincoln; Brooks found the closest approximation to his in Walt Whitman. In designating the poets, novelists and critics as “the pathfinders of society,” Brooks exemplified the young literary radicals’ inclination to identify social revolution with cultural regeneration. Waldo Frank later voiced their attitude when he claimed that Croly’s *Promise* was spoiled only by too great a reliance on the traditional faith in political methods.<sup>27</sup>

“The centre of gravity in American affairs,” Brooks remarked, “has shifted wholly from the plane of politics to the plane of psychology and morals” (*AC*, 168). He referred to the increasing tendency of current thinking to approach political, economic and social issues from psychological perspectives. Under the impact of the developing behavioral sciences and the ideas of certain individuals, notably William James and John Dewey, there was a concerted effort to make politics develop a more adequate understanding of human nature and a greater responsiveness to personal needs and desires. Progressive social thought repeatedly urged that education and social adjustment were more effective methods of social control than prohibitive laws and political coercion. Among the younger minds, Lippmann, in his forceful plea for “the infusion of contemporary insights” from other areas of thought to revitalize politics, singled out as examples James’s concept of developing “moral equivalents” for war, Veblen’s penetrating dissection of America’s mental life and Jane Addams’ “capacity for making ideals the goal of natural desire.” Lippmann was especially impressed by the efforts of the British socialist Graham Wallas to put the analysis of political

institutions in touch with the nature of the men who make them and live under them, and Brooks praised the same thing in the socialism of H. G. Wells, in which he glimpsed an expanding horizon for human nature and individual personality.<sup>28</sup> The influence of such thinking, combined with the newly imported ideas of Freud and others, stimulated the younger generation's crusade for creative individual growth and their stress on man's instinctual and emotional being, both of which marked Brooks's desire for a cultural climate conducive to the development of the whole personality.

But whereas much of the current discussion aimed at enriching political thought with insights from psychology, Brooks in effect bifurcated the two. He felt with Lippmann the "indifference" to conventional politics on the contemporary intellectual scene, but, unlike Lippmann, he did not attempt to remedy the situation by sketching a new attitude toward statecraft designed to further the movement of politics "from a mechanical to a human center."<sup>29</sup> Although he identified his position with socialism, he drew only the most general connections between the literary and social revolutions. The extent of his dealing with politics was to assign the State the essentially negative function of weeding out the incentives to private gain (*AC*, 163). He offered few specific suggestions of how political action and social reconstruction might contribute positively to the quest for higher incentives or values, or how politics might become an effective instrument for promoting self-fulfillment.

Fundamentally, Brooks equated socialism with a spiritual revolution in the American consciousness—the turning away from the old ethic of self-assertion to a new ideal of self-fulfillment. "Socialism," he asserted, "flows from this as light flows from the sun" (*AC*, 180). Such a view as this simile implied placed the real impetus for transforming the social order in the psychological and aesthetic spheres of experience rather than in the usual sphere of political action, and made the development of new political and economic institutions essentially a by-product of the inner reform of the individual. In pinning its hopes for a new America so completely on spiritual conversion, Brooks's thinking was less radical in its political implications than efforts like Croly's or Lippmann's to find a greater rapprochement between the institutional arrangements of society and the personal dimension of human experience.

Brooks's outlook ultimately rested on the prevailing faith that undergirded both the popular ground swell of reform and the intellectual milieu of the Progressive era. Henry May has metaphorically described the American creed of these years as a triptych, with an abiding moralism at the center, flanked by a deep confidence in progress and a belief in culture founded largely on English standards. Seeking to supplant America's vicarious dependence on the Old World with a genuinely indigenous civilization, Brooks made a revised ideal of culture the

central panel of the triptych. But the other two panels were still very much in evidence, as he acknowledged in looking back on the rebellion of his salad days: “. . . condemnatory as they were, these younger minds . . . shared the perennial American faith in the future. Rebels that they were, moreover, they felt that society was somehow secure and based upon moral values that were virtually unchanging.” Brooks might criticize American life and literature for their narrow, self-interested moralism and join others in labeling the traditional myth of progress as the enemy of genuine advancement (*AC*, 85, 176), but his own point of view was thoroughly moral and firmly committed to progress.<sup>30</sup>

When he identified the “centre of gravity” in contemporary affairs with both psychology and morals, the latter were as important in his mind as the former. “The happiest excitement in life is to be convinced that one is fighting for all one is worth on behalf of some clearly seen and deeply felt good and against some greatly scorned evil.” Human issues were fundamentally moral issues, and Brooks gently ridiculed extremists who would abandon the question of good and evil altogether.

For generations the test of a living society, a living philosophy or art, will be whether or not the catchwords it flings forth really correspond with . . . —I was going to say—some good and some evil. But these words are so unfashionable that if I use them I shall certainly alienate any Advanced Person who honors these pages with a glance. (*AC*, 171)

Although he did not express the ethical call to duty with quite the same pungency, Brooks was closer in spirit to John Jay Chapman, throughout whose writings the note of the old New England conscience strongly reverberated, than to Croly, Beard, the muckrakers and others, whose moral stances were in one way or another allied to a strong attraction to science and were often influenced by Jamesian pragmatism or Deweyan instrumentalism. While he undoubtedly approved of Lippmann’s comment that one should be “conservative about values and radical about forms,” Brooks proposed nothing as radical as Lippmann’s idea, drawn from James, of finding “moral equivalents” for evil.

Brooks’s goal of “an organized higher life” merged his moral purpose and his belief in progress. He learned from his intellectual environment to link progress and reform to the idea that men could and should alter the conditions of life as an integral part of the process of evolution. He viewed American history in evolutionary stages. The material conquest of the continent had necessarily spawned individualistic and acquisitive values. But (and here Brooks echoed Progressive economists like Veblen and Simon Patten) the country had reached a new stage where the “prevailing American class” no longer faced a problem of want but a problem of surplus, and hence economic self-assertion in this class was largely “a vicious anachronism” (*AC*, 31). Different values now had to evolve corresponding to this higher level of civilization. Brooks meant by this

the advent of an America which combined a capacity for the richer cultural experience characteristic of Europe with the moral elevation of both the individual and society. In common with many others in these years, he employed the concept of evolution to serve his particular purpose and stopped well short of a thorough-going relativism. The process promised to realize the ideal America he envisioned.

Is it imaginable . . . that . . . we shall fail to rise to the gravity of our situation and recreate, out of the sublime heritage of human ideals, a new synthesis adaptable to the unique conditions of our life? . . .

Then, and only then, shall we cease to be a blind, selfish, disorderly people. We shall become a luminous people, dwelling in the light and sharing our light. (*LL*, 128-29)

In 1919, Brooks summed up the younger generation's disenchantment with the old America—accentuated now by the war and its aftermath—in a strong indictment of Progressive reform for “its lack of critical equipment.”

It had no realistic sense of American life: it ignored the facts of the class struggle, it accepted enthusiastically illusions like that of the “melting-pot,” it wasted its energy in attacking “bad” business without realizing that the spirit of business enterprise is itself the great enemy, it failed to see the need of a consciously organized intellectual class or to appreciate the necessary conjunction in our day of the intellectuals and the proletariat. Worst of all, it had no personal psychology. These crusaders of the “social consciousness” were far from being conscious of themselves. . . .<sup>31</sup>

Brooks's analysis plainly presented a truncated view of the reform era which ignored much that was new and vital in Progressive thought, including, as we have seen, what his own critical equipment owed to it. The Progressive tendency toward a greater realism in viewing American conditions figured importantly in his work. If few of them professed an ideology of class struggle, the best of the muckrakers and reformers paid a great deal of attention to the widening rift between the classes, and their cognizance of the problems of the immigrant raised serious questions about the notion of the “melting-pot.” Chapman, Steffens, Veblen and others graphically portrayed the deleterious effects of the spirit of business, while Croly's hopes for an organized intellectual class prompted him to define an ideal of leadership for the nation. The charge that the reform movement had developed no personal psychology downgraded the concern of Progressive social thought for the constructive expression of personal desires and an environment congenial to individual growth. The main limitations of the Progressive frame of mind were not these, but ones that showed up intensely in Brooks's own thinking—a belief in the essential soundness of human nature that

took little account of man's darker, less tractable side and a confident faith in the coming cultural regeneration. This kind of optimism, bound up with the idea of evolutionary progress, could hold up only so long as history did not severely challenge the stability of moral truth and the conviction that mankind was basically improving—a challenge which soon came in the war and postwar years. Imbued with all the iconoclastic fervor of his contemporaries, Brooks's literary manifestoes nevertheless reveal how thoroughly he remained a spokesman for the age of reform.

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### footnotes

1. See, for example, Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds* (New York, 1942), 81; Henry F. May, *The End of American Innocence: A Study of the First Years of Our Own Time, 1912-1917* (New York, 1959), 322-325; Robert E. Spiller, "The Battle of the Books," *Literary History of the United States*, ed. Spiller et al. (New York, 1949), II, 1136-1137. Hereafter, all citations from *America's Coming-of-Age* (New York, 1915) and *Letters and Leadership* (New York, 1918) will appear in the text in parentheses, with the title, abbreviated *AC* or *LL*, followed by the page numbers.

2. Waldo Frank, *The Re-discovery of America* (New York, 1929), 316-317.

3. May, *The End of American Innocence*, 220-221 *et passim*. May's book is indispensable for an understanding of the intellectual and cultural context in which Brooks was writing, as is Christopher Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America, 1889-1963* (New York, 1965). May seeks to define the distinctive character of the rebellion of the younger generation between 1912 and 1917 as the first stage in a cultural revolution extending to our own day. Lasch's study reveals certain close similarities between older Progressive intellectuals like Jane Addams and Lincoln Steffens and young radicals like Randolph Bourne and Walter Lippmann.

4. See especially, in addition to Lasch and May, Charles Forcey, *The Crossroads of Liberalism* (New York, 1961); Eric Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny* (New York, 1952); Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York, 1955); David Noble, *The Paradox of Progressive Thought* (Minneapolis, 1958); Morton White, *Social Thought in America: The Revolt Against Formalism* (Boston: Beacon Press ed., 1957).

5. Walter Lippmann, rev. of *America's Coming-of-Age, New Republic*, January 1, 1916, 229-230. Randolph Bourne, "A Letter to Van Wyck Brooks," *Twice a Year*, I (1938), 50. "A Preface to the December Number," *Seven Arts*, I (November 1916), 95. Frank, *The Re-discovery of America*, 316-317. Paul Rosenfeld, *Port of New York: Essays on Fourteen American Moderns* (New York, 1924), 19-63. Harold Stearns, *America and the Young Intellectual* (New York, 1921), 24-33. Stuart Pratt Sherman, "The Battle of the Brows," *Nation*, February 16, 1916, 196-197.

6. George Santayana, "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy" (1911), reprinted in *Winds of Doctrine and Platonism and the Spiritual Life* (New York, 1937), 187-188.

7. Brooks, *Scenes and Portraits* (New York, 1954), 147.

8. Bourne, "This Older Generation," *History of a Literary Radical and Other Essays* (New York, 1920), 114. Lippmann, *A Preface to Politics* (Ann Arbor, 1962 [New York, 1913]), *passim*.

9. Herbert Croly, *The Promise of American Life* (New York, 1909), 150.

10. Brooks was perhaps inspired by Lippmann who also used Steffens' argument (*A Preface to Politics*, 38-40). Jane Addams presented a similar analysis of political "bossism" in "Why the Ward Boss Rules," *Outlook*, April 2, 1898, 879-882.

11. John Jay Chapman, *Emerson and Other Essays* (New York, 1899), 96-107. Chapman, however, saw Emerson as the exception. Whatever his limitations, such as a lingering Puritan asceticism, he exemplified the writer who "consistently and utterly expressed himself." For Brooks, on the other hand, Emerson epitomized the shortcomings of the traditional American mentality. While he hoped the Concord sage would someday be admired in his true place in the world of the spirit, Brooks felt that Emerson had so far affected American life only by giving an idealistic sanction to the self-reliant individualism of the American millionaire (*AC*, 70-85).

12. "What is there in it for me?" is the state of mind in which our people have been existing. Out of this come the popular philosophy, the social life, the architecture, the letters, the temper of the age. . . ." Chapman, *Causes and Consequences* (New York, 1899), 55.

- “ . . . Politics is business. That’s what’s the matter with it. That’s what’s the matter with everything,—art, literature, religion, journalism, law, medicine,—they’re all business, and all—as you see them.” Steffens, *The Shame of the Cities* (New York, 1957 [1904]), 4.
13. William Allen White, *The Old Order Changeth* (New York, 1910), 167.
14. Ray Stannard Baker, *American Chronicle* (New York, 1945), 185. Steffens, *The Struggle for Self-Government* (New York, 1906), 160.
15. Chapman, *Causes and Consequences*, 7, 101. *Practical Agitation* (New York, 1900), 144. Chapman made use of the ideas of the German educator Friedrich Froebel to argue that the growth of the whole man depended upon his creative interaction with others for unselfish ends (*Causes*, 83-112). Chapman’s emphasis on the fundamental bond between creative self-expression and cooperative activity closely paralleled the educational theories of John Dewey and others among the Progressives. Such ideas lent support to the view that individual creativity and disinterestedness were two sides of the same coin.
16. Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, 22, 103, 411, 417 *et passim*.
17. Lippmann, *A Preface to Politics*, 49.
18. Baker, *American Chronicle*, 183.
19. In discussing the motives for educated, middle-class persons entering settlement work, Jane Addams pointed out that to ignore the struggle against starvation, which was the central element in human history and still occupied at least half the race, deadened one’s sympathies and powers of enjoyment and forced one “to live out half the humanity which we have been born heir to and to use but half our faculties.” (“The Subjective Necessity for Social Settlements” [1892], reprinted in *The Social Thought of Jane Addams*, ed. Christopher Lasch [New York, 1965], 35). Max Eastman remarked that if contemporary artists exhibited a tendency “to linger among destitutes and prostitutes and those whom exploitation has driven to vagrancy and crime, this is not because these seem truer subjects of art, but because they are subjects of art which have so long been unrecognized.” (*Journalism Versus Art* [New York, 1916], 58). As a youthful writer in New York, Brooks went through a Bohemian phase. (*Scenes and Portraits*, 124, 151-152.)
20. Bourne, “Trans-National America,” *Atlantic Monthly*, CXVIII (July 1916), 86-97.
21. James Oppenheim, “The Story of *The Seven Arts*,” *American Mercury*, XX (June 1930), 156.
22. Waldo Frank dated the new critical movement in America from the appearance of Croly’s book. (*The Re-discovery of America*, 314.) Brooks drew on Croly to support his own thinking on the exploitive instinct of the pioneer mind and the stultifying effect of business on individuality. (*The Ordeal of Mark Twain* [New York, 1920], 44-45, 60-61.)
23. Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, 1-26, 281, 406.
24. Lippmann, *A Preface to Politics*, 29-30, 214. Steffens’ admiration for this type of strong democratic leadership can be seen in his sketch of Mayor Tom Johnson of Cleveland in *The Struggle for Self-Government*, 183-198, and the five portraits of individual reformers in *Upbuilders* (New York, 1909).
25. Croly, “Why I Wrote My Latest Book,” *World’s Work*, XX (June 1910), 13086.
26. Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, 453.
27. Frank, *The Re-discovery of America*, 314.
28. Lippmann, *A Preface to Politics*, 40-42, 62-68. Brooks, *The World of H. G. Wells* (New York, 1915).
29. Lippmann, *A Preface to Politics*, 1, 4, 67.
30. May, *The End of American Innocence*, 30. Brooks, *The Confident Years: 1885-1915* (New York, 1952), 493.
31. Brooks, Introduction to Bourne, *History of a Literary Radical*, xxiii-iv.