

The Disobedience of John William Ward: Myth, Symbol, and Political Praxis in the Vietnam Era

James Patrick Brown

On May 11, 1972, John William Ward sat down in front of Westover Air Force Base near Chicopee, Massachusetts, with his wife Barbara, 1,000 students, and 20 faculty members from Amherst College in protest against Richard Nixon's escalation of offensive bombing in Southeast Asia. Like numerous social critics of his era and many of his students, John Ward had become opposed to what he considered America's imperialistic foreign policy in Vietnam. Unlike most of these critics, however, and unlike his students, Ward was also the recently appointed president of Amherst College. Also unlike his students, John Ward was a central figure in the myth and symbol school of American studies scholarship, a theoretical approach to the field that has been erroneously associated with Cold War complicity and American military hegemony.¹

Five hundred protestors were arrested at the Air Force base outside Amherst, Massachusetts. Among them was the author of *Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age*, a primary text in the myth and symbol tradition. In this paper, I explore the intellectual roots of John Ward's act of civil disobedience—an act that arose directly from his understanding of problems inherent in American life as viewed through the lens of myth and symbol criticism—and trace his application of myth and symbol methodology to the core problems of the Vietnam era: the problems of political protest and political violence, including war. In the process,



Figure 1: John William Ward with Barbara Ward and a student at Westover AFB, MA. Courtesy of Amherst College Archives and Special Collections.

I will show how, through the myth and symbol methodology, Ward forged for himself a justification for meaningful political praxis in opposition to U.S. policy.

In the context of the 1960s and early 1970s, Ward's act of civil disobedience was comparatively benign. The Watts and Chicago race riots, the Berkeley free speech movement, the Kent State shootings, and the Chicago Democratic National convention had forced Americans to confront civil disobedience as a feature of American life, one that would persist at least as long as social injustice existed. Even the "establishment" was beginning to accept that protesters could be and often were in the right. The Walker report on violence at the 1968 Democratic convention, for instance, concluded that, while ultimately inexplicable, the violence that erupted largely resulted from a police riot coupled with Mayor Daly's inflexibly legalistic attitude in the weeks before the convention.² Daniel Walker, whom the National Commission on Violence appointed to write the report was, in the words of Max Frankel of *The New York*

Times, “the very essence of an establishmentarian.”³ Uniquely for an “establishmentarian” of his period, however, John Ward did not just hold that protestors could be right while the establishment could be wrong. Rather, after examining contradictions in the American consciousness through a myth and symbol lens, he concluded that the establishment should itself generate protest and that failure to do so was a failure of both community and education.

Unfortunately for Ward’s intellectual legacy, *Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age*, Ward’s most-read book, one which relates the ways in which Jackson came to symbolize in nineteenth-century political discourse and the popular press American wildness, providence, and military will, is not his most methodologically self-reflexive work. Arguably, the closest it comes to a statement of its own methods occurs when Ward notes that an examination of a popular song about Jackson’s military victory at the battle of New Orleans brings us, as readers, into “the area of imaginative play, which is less concerned with history than with objectifying concepts which are the chief supports of culture.” Myths and symbols, “objectifying concepts” that support the dominant culture, gain currency in any age because they have a “nationalistic appeal” that serves to further national aims, such as Westward expansion.⁴ With a smattering of a few such exceptions, most of Ward’s *Andrew Jackson* simply and directly explores the myths and symbols that the Jacksonian age projected onto its president. As a result, Ward’s primary contribution to American studies leaves readers with the sense that Ward’s myth and symbol criticism, as Bruce Kuklick wrote in his critique of myth and symbol in general, did not “adequately define what it was about.”⁵

To encounter Ward adequately defining “what he was about,” therefore, I will turn to three sources that provide direct insight into the thought processes behind his justification for civil disobedience. First, I will consider *Red, White, and Blue*, a collection of essays published in the political heat of 1969. Second, I will explore Ward’s review of Alexander Berkman’s anarchist manifesto, *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist*, which was published in 1970 “against the background of the 1960’s, with an eye to the rioting in America’s inner cities and to the increasing violence of the opposition to the Vietnam War.”⁶ Finally, I will discuss his reflections on the meaning and importance of civil disobedience in essays composed in the year following his arrest, which were addressed to a variety of audiences, ranging from concerned parents of Amherst students to activist historians. Many of the sources used here are held in the John William Ward archives at Amherst. Previously unpublished, they warrant attention as documents in the Cold War intellectual history of the university, a field that has covered topics ranging from the complicity of artists and academics with the CIA, to academic freedom in the McCarthy era, to support of the military-industrial complex in a variety of disciplines.⁷

One wall of the John Ward special collections room at Amherst College holds an oil painting of Ward poised over a large desk, with a copy of *Red,*



Figure 2: John William Ward by Robert T. Sweeney; oil on canvas, 1997.

White, and Blue, his second major book, beside him. Beneath this portrait are several framed photographs, including one of John and Barbara Ward at the gates of Westover Air Force Base surrounded by students, and another of John Ward passing a diploma to the first female student to graduate from Amherst after the college, under Ward's watch, became co-educational in 1974. Given

the way the wall is arranged, with the large painted portrait centering the two most significant events of his career, one is left with the impression that Ward's political life emanated directly from the writing contained in *Red, White, and Blue*, or that the authority of his activism depended for its coherence on the distinguished academic career collected in *Red, White, and Blue*'s pages. Though this interpretation might suggest a melioristic narrative structure more appropriate to a memorial than to an intellectual history, Ward would likely have been pleased by this reading, since, in his words, "The proper subject of the historian is not the fact of an action (the event, if one will), but the processes of thought which go on in the mind of the actor which are disclosed in, and establish the meaning of, that action."⁸ Indeed, *Red, White, and Blue* discloses the process of Ward's thought and establishes the meaning of his civil disobedience at the same time that it clarifies his myth and symbol approach to cultural criticism.

Compiled in 1969, Ward's collection of essays represented an early career retrospective, spanning the years 1957 to 1968, and offered an overview of the use that Ward had made of myth and symbol criticism. As such, *Red, White, and Blue* gave Ward the opportunity to theorize his approach to American history and culture. Central to this approach was his view that the history of the actions of individuals and the consciousness of the culture from which the individual emerged were inseparable. "The two major areas of my own interests," he wrote in his introduction to the volume, were "the way in which history and imagination shape each other."⁹ For Ward, the myth and symbol critic was foremost a "cultural historian"¹⁰ interested in the connection between thought and action, ideology and praxis. Since all thought and action occurred in culture, which Ward defined as "*the organization of social experience in the consciousness of men made manifest in symbolic action*,"¹¹ the myth and symbol critic was concerned with the relationship between the group and the individual. The individual was both a symbolic representative of the group and a person of responsibility acting sometimes for and other times in opposition to the group. In examining individual symbolic actions and the group's—the nation or society's—response to them, Ward held, the attentive historian unearths contradictions between the society's culturally ingrained image of itself and historical reality. In other words, Ward saw myth and symbol history as the study of contradictions in American ideology made manifest in actions. Viewed this way, myth and symbol criticism serves to problematize the very culture it studies in order to demystify or de-mythologize that culture's constructs.

All of these elements of Ward's myth and symbolic criticism appear in his essay "The Meaning of Lindbergh's Flight" (1958), a widely anthologized examination of the effects of cultural production on the mythic status of a culturally manufactured hero. In this essay, Ward argued that certain contradictions in Charles Lindbergh's 1927 transatlantic flight were overlooked in the national rhetoric that followed it so that Lindbergh could fulfill an ideological need for the nation. The national press transformed Lindbergh into



Figure 3: Anita Cilderman, the first woman to graduate from Amherst, and John William Ward. Commencement, 1976. Courtesy of Amherst College Archives and Special Collections.

a pioneer type “to link him” rhetorically “with a long and vital tradition of individualism in the American experience.”¹² Lindbergh became in the national imagination a figure of the frontier, a lone rider who “came of the West and rode all alone.”¹³ Lindbergh as a symbol and his flight as a myth, however, were immediately contradicted by the very plane that lifted him across the Atlantic and elevated him in the American imagination. *The Spirit of St. Louis* was a technological achievement whose production required the cooperation of industry and technicians in a rapidly advancing technological society that in reality left little room for the nineteenth-century individualism Lindbergh came to represent. “Organization and careful method were what lay behind the flight, not individual self-sufficiency and daring romance,”¹⁴ and thus Lindbergh’s flight, an “individual” action, contained a dialectical tension irreconcilable except in the realm of ideology.

The value of myth and symbol criticism for Ward, as his Lindbergh essay suggests, lay in its ability to uncover contradictions in cultural mythologies, but it was also valuable insofar as it served to prepare individuals for positive action in the present. “What history can do,” in Ward’s view, “is enlarge our experience of the events that have entered into the shaping of the present in which we live and move and, thus, makes us more aware, in itself a virtue, and perhaps through

awareness better able to act.”¹⁵ Such a perspective on the value of history could only develop in the mind of someone committed to the view that action was nothing other than expressed thought, a view that guided Ward’s professional work—his *theory*—as well as his political praxis, at least in relation to the Vietnam War. The tools that Ward used to examine history led him to note and question the contradiction between the collective, mechanized society that was a source of war (“the military-industrial complex,” in Cold War parlance) and the individual, politically free agent that America celebrated in its mythology. What, Ward began asking himself in the late 1950s and early 1960s, was the responsibility of the individual intellectual in a climate that contradicted the promise of America by silencing the expression of individual conscience?

Ward examined this question in several essays, including “Mill, Marx, and Modern Individualism” (1959), which he prefaced with John Stuart Mill’s remark that “nothing seems to be more needed” than individualism “for opinion tends to encroach more and more on liberty,”¹⁶ and “The Ideal of Individualism and the Reality of the Organization” (1964). In these essays, by treating individualism as a myth that carries within it its own historical contradictions, Ward tied the question of the social responsibility of the individual to transformations in the definition of individualism that had occurred throughout American history in response to social change. Without a clear definition of individualism, he argued in “Mill, Marx, and Modern Individualism,” “we are in danger of surrendering our individual wills to the group with which we work, the class to which we belong, or the society in which we live” and thus letting the present situation run “violently counter to much of our professed belief” in the autonomy of the democratic person.¹⁷ Indeed, Americans, “without ever having read Marx,” were, throughout the Cold War years, “unwittingly developing a conception of democracy which postulates a general will as tyrannous as Plato’s or Marx’s.”¹⁸ This “general will” had gained hegemony because the very meaning of the individual had shifted over the course of a century, as had the place in which the individual was presumed to stand in relation to society.

In Ward’s view, this fundamental shift in the meaning of American individualism occurred in the late nineteenth century, when American myth-makers—the popular press, politicians, and intellectuals—pasted a republican, libertarian definition of individualism over the new gospel of wealth exemplified by a rising class of industrialists. In the Gilded Age, the ethic of self-reliance was reborn in the guise of the great organizers of capital, even as, paradoxically, one of them—John D. Rockefeller—announced its end with the words “Individualism has gone, never to return.”¹⁹ At the same historical moment that vast amounts of wealth were being reorganized with the sanction of the state by a handful of individuals presumably serving the greater good, the culture found a way, Ward wrote, “to preserve the emotional sanctions of the ideal of individualism. That was to change its meaning” from the ideal of the individual as a self-reliant, free agent to the ideal of the individual described “in terms of

functional fitness . . . in terms of his ability to contribute to the group.”²⁰ In the mid-twentieth century, this idea of the individual as an extraordinary conformist had become the new American gospel, and it was disguised behind the very nineteenth-century myth that it had displaced. For Ward, the twentieth-century gospel of the sham individual was summed up in Eisenhower’s duplicitous statement, “more than ever before, in our country, this is the age of the individual. . . . There is no limit . . . to the temporal goals we set ourselves—as free individuals joined in a team with our fellows.”²¹

In making this argument and marshalling Eisenhower’s words as evidence, Ward was beginning to carve a place in the present for a new kind of individual, one who would bind the best of the past, with its emphasis on absolute freedom, however untenable, with that of the present, with its complex social arrangements and emphasis on the group. Since the bond between the individual and society was unbreakable, one could neither resurrect the nineteenth-century free republican nor surrender to the wiles of the ever-expanding organizational society. As a result, Ward argued, there was a need for a new kind of organization to match his new kind of social individual: “Our choice is not between organizations and something else. It is a choice between organizations that serve our needs and ideals and organizations that do not.”²² Here, myth was beginning to serve as a spur to social action, for if the promise of America and thus its guiding myth was that society existed for the benefit of the individual, then the individual was responsible for seeing to it that such a society existed:

If Americans insist that society exists to serve the individual, not the individual to serve society, then we must show more imagination in the organization of our organizations in order to bring them at least within hailing distance of our professed ideas.

To profess ideas was to begin acting on them, to imagine a future was to partake in its creation, to have an ideology implied the need for a praxis, and to create a myth of the individual was to demand that individuals untangle the complexities of that myth in order to free themselves for activism.²³

Anyone of intellectual acuity could have reached similar conclusions by following Ward’s dialectic of American individualism to its logical synthesis. Paul Goodman, for instance, argued on behalf of a new individual who could, once free to express his or her individuality, actively pursue and create a society capable of fulfilling the promise of America by better ensuring the dignity of each of its members.²⁴ Critics such as Goodman, however, did not have the power of a prestigious college president, a position that made Ward’s civil disobedience unique in fact if not in form. When he was hired as president of Amherst in 1971, after having taught there for six years, Ward found himself firmly embedded in the very organizational power structure that he had been

critiquing for at least a decade. This was true of many in academia, of course, but few were canonical representatives of a dominant mode of criticism in the humanities. Further, most college and university presidents and high-profile academics, as Frances Stonor Saunders has shown in painstaking detail, continued to flinch from the sting of McCarthyism as late as the 1970s.²⁵ Arguably, for American studies, Ward was the highest profile academic opponent of an American Cold War policy since F. O. Matthiessen, a socialist and Communist sympathizer widely credited as a progenitor of the interdisciplinary myth and symbol approach. In his essays on individualism, Ward was repudiating not only President Dwight Eisenhower's obscuration of the meaning of individualism but also the very spirit of an age that applauded wholeheartedly President John F. Kennedy's maxim that one should ask not what one's country could do for the individual but should rather ask how one could sacrifice oneself for one's country. Instead, Ward was arguing, one should act to ensure that the country served the individuals in it.

This view of social responsibility, in which the individual was responsible for the forging of institutions that better fulfilled the American mythology of personal freedom and which arose from a view of history whereby the study of cultural myths underscored contradictions in that mythology, directly impinged upon Ward's view of the responsibility of the individual academic and academic institutions. In "The Intellectual: Cleric or Critic?" (1965), Ward extended his use of the myth-symbol approach to probe the contradictory role of the academic historian in an institutional context. In the mid-1960s, there was a "tension inherent in the nature of the university," as Ward saw it, between a "dreaded fear of conformity" on the part of academics and the social mandate that professors create individuals who are able to perform like others—"in other words, . . . conform to the expectations of society."²⁶ As a result, the intellectual was situated as both cleric and critic, responsible on the one hand for transmitting "the mores and values of the culture" across generations and on the other for critiquing those same mores and values. Suggesting a way through the horns of this dilemma, Ward argued that "in the very act of formulating and articulating the values of the culture, the intellectual is driven to see tensions and even contradictions within the system of values that society knows and cherishes as tradition."²⁷ One could, in other words, teach a given set of values critically and thus pass them forward as values criticized. In the process, since the historian was critiquing values that persisted in the present, "even as cleric . . . the intellectual is, in accepting that role, plunged deeply and inevitably into the battles of his own time."²⁸

Here, Ward came close to offering a direct statement of what he perceived as the significance of the historical profession vis-à-vis political praxis. Elsewhere, he elaborated the political value of myth and symbol criticism in particular. In the John Ward collection at Amherst College, notes that Ward used while preparing an essay entitled "The Function of an Ideal" reveal the

process by which he defined the dominant American studies paradigm of the Cold War era in terms of a force for positive social change. On an index card titled “Myth and Change,” Ward argued that although anthropologists had articulated a definition of myth as something that “enhanced” tradition, “logically there is no reason why myth might not facilitate change, reject tradition.” For example, the “myth of nature” in American life allowed “a society to throw off the restraints of tradition” even as the myth of nature was itself an element of tradition. Such myths could have the practical effect of overturning tradition, Ward concluded.²⁹ While this argument is clearly assailable—one might explore, for instance, the importance of anti-traditionalism in the American market to show that a tradition that eschews tradition can in fact support something even more “traditional”—it also shows Ward struggling to translate his scholarship into meaningful praxis. If one thought against tradition, if one’s guiding myths sided with freedom for the individual against institutions that sought to limit that freedom, one’s actions in history, given Ward’s definition of history as consciousness translated into action, would necessarily emerge informed by “a mythology of change”³⁰ that pressed for a society more responsive to the needs of individuals.

It naturally followed from the view that myth and symbol criticism was a mode of thought translated into political action that the individual academic was responsible for seeing to it that thought became real activity, since the myth and symbol critic, thinking dialectically, “confronts us with the need to consider and to address the tension that persists into our own present and to attempt some resolution of it in some way in present action.” As a kind of cleric, Ward argued, the historian, who “appeals to us to share that judgment on what he first seems simply to describe,” must necessarily become “troublesome” to the establishment.³¹ Further, Ward felt, the activist role of the academic should extend beyond the individual intellectual to the university as a whole.

Myth and symbol criticism, then, for Ward, was an historical approach to understanding society that discovered in cultural ideologies (i.e., myths) contradictions, the explication of which constitutes a criticism of the social present that leads to activism on behalf of a more just society. In working out this definition of myth and symbol criticism through the course of his career, Ward had been laying the groundwork for a personal political praxis grounded in his intellectual pursuits and supported by his view of the individual as an agent ethically bound to seek social justice. His act of protest—the disobedience of John William Ward—was not, however, supported by theory alone. Rather, it was responsive to troubling cultural currents that demanded an answer: the violence of war, poverty, and protest that had plagued the decade in which he was steadily rising in the ranks of academe. Ward found occasion to explore the problem of political violence, and of political action more generally, in his response to a book that gained sudden currency in the wake of the 1960s: Alexander Berkman’s anarchist classic, *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist*.

Alexander Berkman's memoirs, first published in 1912 by Emma Goldman's Mother Earth Press, is a book with a turbulent publication history. Having gone to press in several editions, including Yiddish, Chinese, and German translations, in the first half of the twentieth century, it sat virtually dormant through the McCarthy and early Cold War eras. Its republication by two presses in 1969 and 1970 could be read as signaling a cultural moment in which political violence was an issue of immediate importance and in which activists were beginning to consider anarchy a legitimate response to what they viewed as various government imperialisms.³² *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist*, dedicated "to all those who in and out of prison fight against their bondage,"³³ relates the story of Alexander Berkman's attempted assassination, in 1892, of Henry Clay Frick, Andrew Carnegie's partner, in retaliation for Frick's militaristic suppression of the Homestead steelworker strike, and of Berkman's subsequent incarceration in Pennsylvania's Western Penitentiary. Written in 1970 for the New York Review Books edition of *Prison Memoirs*, Ward's essay on Berkman's story examined, in his typically myth-symbolistic manner, the tensions evident in a core American mythology—America's radically republican promise of a "benign anarchism," personified in the figure of Jefferson—and the violence that erupted partly as a result of these tensions.

One of the central conflicts arising from America's promise of a benign anarchism, Ward argued, was between violent opposition to oppression by a long stream of activists and the violence of the state. For Ward, Berkman's memoir forced the question, "Is violence, rather than some mad aberration, an intrinsic and understandable part" of the American experience derived from "our best and noblest ideals about the meaning and the promise of American life?"³⁴ Did individuals, in other words, violently oppose the state because the state failed to live up to its mythical function as a guardian of liberty? If so, then this myth of liberty had served to motivate Berkman's direct action. Berkman, an immigrant from Russia, expresses in his autobiography his profound disappointment with America's betrayal of its ideals. One of the values of Berkman's work, in Ward's view, was its ability as literature to allow the reader to understand this betrayal from the inside out, to "identify with a man who idealistically accepts terrorism as a political instrument" and thus sympathetically comprehend the cultural contradictions that underlay Berkman's activism.³⁵ In the process of sympathizing with Berkman and identifying with his act, readers could better understand not only the causes of political violence, but also the necessity for activism. Indeed, one of the primary lessons that Ward derived from *Prison Memoirs* was that "[w]e must act on our ideals or change our minds."³⁶ Essentially, Ward was advocating, in modified form, what Berkman and his anarchist comrades had advocated in a violent incarnation: direct political action.

In discussing Berkman's biography, Ward was treating Berkman as a symbolic expression of the myth of American liberty through the same lens that

he had treated such American figures as Andrew Jackson, John F. Kennedy, and Huck Finn. In “Anarchy and Authority in American Literature,” published the same year as his essay on Berkman (1970), Ward applied his interest in anarchism to the canonical literary expressions of what he called the “benign anarchist” strain in American thought, a strain that resolved into familiar literary figures who, as symbols, represented and enacted a longing for absolute freedom. In Mark Twain, Henry Thoreau, Herman Melville, and James Fenimore Cooper, Ward found expressions of an America caught between the authority of the state and “the anarchist vision coursing through nineteenth century American literature” that “speaks for a wish to undo restrictions which violate the deepest [national] myth” of liberty.³⁷ This tension—evident, for instance, in Huck and Jim’s constantly interrupted journey of friendship that could only have occurred outside social constraints—represented “an endless dialectic in our life and our literature,” the “clash between anarchy and authority.”³⁸

Arguably, through this brief interest in “benign” anarchy as America’s “deepest national myth,” an interest that coincided with his appointment to a post of institutional authority, Ward was moving intellectually from the question of *what to act on* (belief in the myth of individual freedom and the view that institutions were first and foremost responsible for ensuring this freedom) to the question of *how one should act*. Indeed, in exploring the social implications of Berkman’s retaliatory violence, Ward began formulating a personal model for effective political activism. The catalyzing event of Berkman’s book was, after all, a direct action, an assassination attempt that became “a testing ground for his [Berkman’s] theory.”³⁹ While writing his Berkman essay, Ward was seeking a testing ground for his own theories. What Berkman taught Ward, through the development of his character and the themes examined in his text, was that effective political action must emerge in a form recognizable to the audience for whom it is intended. This, in fact, was the central lesson of Berkman’s life. In prison, Berkman repeatedly encounters fellow inmates who insist that his act must have been motivated by something other than the desire to liberate the proletariat from its oppressions through propaganda of the deed. Greed, power, or revenge—those far more compelling components of American life—seemed more legitimate explanations for political assassination to the majority of prisoners, to the press, and to the mass of American people. What kind of political action, Berkman began asking himself, might better convey the messages the anarchists wished to communicate to “the people”? Berkman did not answer this question directly, but the appearance of his book after his release from prison suggests that he redirected his energies from propaganda of the deed to propaganda of the word.

Ward, by contrast, was redirecting his energies from propaganda of the word to that of the deed, though not without internalizing the lessons he derived from Berkman. In Ward’s words, as he gradually became aware of the futility of violent protest in an American context, Berkman learned to distinguish between

“an individual act and a social act.”⁴⁰ The former was an act for which “the background of social necessity was lacking”; in other words, an act fated to be misunderstood by a culture where “the ideology is . . . immune to revolutionary and violent action,” where, as in America, the democratic “ideology which holds captive even those who are oppressed” rendered violent revolt unthinkable to most Americans.⁴¹ Since propaganda is a social act rather than an act of mere personal expiation, its success depends upon what Jacques Ellul has called “pre-propaganda,” the background of socialization that makes an act, word, or spectacle meaningful to its receivers.⁴² Paradoxically, Ward noted, America’s professed “freedom from external restraint means that the individual must internalize the values of the culture, and restrain himself,” with the result that we are “puzzled when violence is used to attack” the state but relatively undisturbed by the fact that “violence has been used again and again to support the structure of authority in American society.”⁴³ Underpinning this entire quagmire was what Ward considered the central conflict between democratic freedom and political dissent: “The insistence that all men are free and equal leads to the curious consequence of mass conformity and a mood of intolerance for dissent in any form.” “The fault, as Berkman”—and, in fact, John Ward—“would have it lies in American consciousness.”⁴⁴

Ward concluded his essay on Berkman with a call to action premised on what he saw as the basic social responsibility of academics. If Americans were incapable of understanding why a person might choose to resist institutionalized aggression and if the fault for this inability lay in America’s consciousness, Ward concluded, as “the keepers of that consciousness, American intellectuals have dismally failed in their responsibility to American society,” since

[o]ne of the functions of the intellectual is to raise to consciousness the ambiguities inherent in the professed ideals of our society, and to make clear the meaning of social forces implicit in the actions of society that contradict those ideals.⁴⁵

If the “actions of society” lent support to an unceasing war in Vietnam, then the intellectual was obligated to address directly the question of whether such an action was conversant with America’s mythology of freedom. Ward saw himself as contributing just such a critique in his Berkman essay, implying that this essay entailed meaningful political action in and of itself, since “simply to read is inevitably a political act.” Two years after the publication of this essay, however, this somewhat indirect example of a political act would translate into direct protest.

A clear expression of Ward’s political orientation away from a politics of the word toward that of the deed appears in the transcript of the speech he delivered to activist students at Amherst the night before the joint student/faculty protest at Westover Air Force base:

Night before last . . . a student called my home and left word with my wife that he and other students hoped I would write a letter [in support of their planned protest]. Write a letter? To whom? One feels like a child throwing paper planes against a brick wall. I might write such a letter and you might cheer and, if the world goes on, you might think me a pleasant and sympathetic fellow. But the mines are laid [outside North Vietnam's harbors] . . . [and i]nstead I will, for myself, join in the act of passive civil disobedience at Westover Air Force base.⁴⁶

The expressed reasons for this decision were twofold. First, there was the immediate situation of the Vietnam War, which Ward had publicly called a “cruel and foolish mistake.”⁴⁷ The second, and less obvious, reason was rooted in Ward's historical view of the role of the individual in society. If, as Ward had concluded in his study of American myth and symbol, America offered a myth of absolute freedom that it had failed to deliver, the individual had a responsibility to ensure, as Berkman had done in his misguided way, that the right to protest remained intact: “What I protest,” Ward said, “is that there is no way to protest.”⁴⁸ Indeed, Ward revealed himself as a fatalist on the question of Vietnam itself, arguing that verbal dissent would not change the minds of those in power (“I do not think words will now change the minds of those in power who make decisions”). Ward's fatalism, however, did not devolve into defeatism, as it might have for any number of university presidents entrenched in and unable to speak against the ongoing march of war. Indeed, precisely because the war seemed unstoppable, Ward confessed, “I do not care to write letters to the world.” Instead, he chose to defend, in the process of publicly opposing the war, a mythology central to his study of American culture: the mythology of the right of the individual to dissent against uncontrollable government power that was inherent in the texts comprising the Cold War canon—texts, such as *Huckleberry Finn*, *Walden*, the *Leatherstocking Tales*, *Moby Dick*, and others that he had examined in his study of “benign anarchy,” which underwrote the citizen's right to protest government incursion into the conscience of *Homo socius*.

Ironically, in spite of his attention to the necessity for social rather than individual forms of protest (in other words, for protest that could be understood by the intended audience and thus have the intended social effect), following his arrest, Ward found himself under the microscope of public scrutiny. Concerned parents wrote letters protesting Ward's protest, members of Amherst's alumni association threatened to withdraw their financial support of the school, columnists questioned Ward's sincerity, and educators debated whether a college president should take a public stand on any political issue. At the heart of the criticism of Ward was a sharp distinction between public and private life that Ward had already taken to task in *Red, White, and Blue's* essays on individualism.

Specifically, Ward's critics argued that a college president had a responsibility, first and foremost, to the institution. Only secondarily did an educator have a responsibility to his or her own ethics. Ward, of course, had concluded that institutions, first and foremost, were responsible to individuals and that the individual's primary responsibility to institutions was to ensure that they served individuals. In Ward's view, an individual did not surrender this responsibility simply by joining an institution, working a job, or pledging allegiance to a union of states.

In response to his critics, Ward turned to the conclusions he had drawn from his exploration of American myths and symbols, to the conflict between the individual and society as it had evolved through two centuries of American history. The relevant conflict, he argued, was not between a university president and a university, but between the citizen and organized society. The question was not whether college presidents should publicly express a political view; rather, the question was, as Ward saw it, "Should a citizen" in general "take a stand on sensitive public issues?" "This question is important," Ward told a panel at the 1973 American Association of Higher Education conference in Chicago, "because it draws in its train central questions about the meaning and conduct of our common political life."⁴⁹ In this address to a panel (which was formed specifically in response to the attention that his act had drawn to the responsibility of intellectuals in times of conflict) and in speeches given to concerned parents and college stakeholders, Ward reiterated the central tension he had underscored for a decade between the myth of American individualism and the ubiquity of an institutional society that suppressed individual freedom, and he offered a synthesis toward which his theory had been tending: "A political community which accepts a government and its policies . . . bears a collective responsibility for the actions of its government [and] an individual who continues to accept membership in the political community bears, by derivation, a personal and individual share of that collective responsibility."⁵⁰

As evident here, in formulating his historical outlook and ideological justification for oppositional political praxis, Ward avoided rehearsing the false dichotomy between the individual and society too often assumed by critics of individualism and "socialism" alike. The individual was imminently social, Ward held, and society emerged from the individual consciousness that culture played a part in shaping. This symbiotic relationship between the individual and society demanded not only better institutions, but also a new investment in the kind of individualism without which protest on behalf of a better community would have been impossible. In fact, he held that "the government of the United States" through suppression of the individual conscience had become "a threat to the [very] existence of a public will."⁵¹ In a world where the individual has no voice, Ward concluded after a decade of applying myth and symbol criticism to the question of individual responsibility, "the institution has no voice and the public vanishes." "In such a world" devoid of constructive individualism, "there is no public. There is only power."⁵²

It has been argued that myth and symbol criticism during the Cold War years underwrote U.S. foreign and domestic policy by propagating a national mythology of individualism that supported an exceptionalist view of American freedom, thus bolstering a nationalistic, anti-Communist rhetoric.⁵³ By contrast, David Riesman, William Whyte, and others, writing during the Cold War itself, saw an America bridled by institutional authoritarianism and marked by conformist other-direction rather than by runaway individualism.⁵⁴ Recapitulating this view, John William Ward discovered the need for a degree of individualism that would enable the individual conscience to exert itself in a time of war, not in opposition to foreign regimes of power but in opposition to the policies of a domestic government that Ward saw as unresponsive to the needs of the community. To arrive at this conclusion, he formulated a view of history directed toward enabling an activist stance over and against the authority of dominant institutions. In this view of history, cultural myths came to represent nodes of conflict and dialectical tension between ideology and action, theory and practice. Further, the measure of an historical act came to be defined as the degree to which ideology and action coincided—in other words, the degree to which the actual consciousness of the individual was “made manifest in” that individual’s “symbolic action.” It followed from this formulation not only that ideology and practice should match, but also that academics, as critics and carriers of the culture, should use the most effective tools available to underscore the failure of the nation to live up to its ideals. For Ward, myth and symbol criticism was just such a tool.

Notes

1. Such critiques fit broadly into the New Americanist mode of American studies criticism. According to Donald Pease, one proponent of this mode, during the Cold War, “Americanist policies of neocolonialism and cultural imperialism abroad and liberal anticommunism at home” gained support from “the literary critics who instituted the cold war canon,” including F. O. Matthiessen, R. W. B. Lewis, Henry Nash Smith, Richard Chase, and Perry Miller, all of whom are associated with myth and symbol criticism. U.S. global policy, Pease argues, “depended for its coherence” on their scholarship. Paul Giles has argued, along similar lines, that “F. O. Matthiessen, Richard Chase and others,” in their “critical recapitulation of a transcendental ethic of higher freedom,” were “implicitly endorsing a patriotic version of liberty that became institutionally equated with the idea of America itself” and that supported a “rhetorical anti-Marxism” typical of “American studies during [the Cold War] years.” And according to Cecelia Tichi, “the premise of transcendent democratic truths embodied in texts of aesthetic genius is . . . ideologically self-serving to certain groups, especially to white male elites, and enactive of its own historical moment, such as the cold war.” See Donald Pease, “National Narratives, Postnational Narration,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 43, no. 1 (1997): 1-23; Paul Giles, “Virtual Americas: The Internationalization of American Studies and the Ideology of Exchange,” *American Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (1998), 523-547; and Cecelia Tichi, “American Literary Studies to the Civil War,” in *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*, ed. Giles Gunn (New York: MLA, 1992), 220.

2. Daniel Walker, *Rights in Conflict* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1968), 1-11, 59-71.

3. Max Frankel, introduction to Walker, *Rights in Conflict*, ix. Specifically, Walker was a “prominent Chicago attorney and civic leader, the president of the prestigious . . . Chicago Crime Commission, a former naval officer, aide to Adlai E. Stevenson and . . . Vice President and Council of Marcor, Inc.”

4. John William Ward, *Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), 29.

5. Bruce Kuklick, "Myth and Symbol in American Studies," in *Locating American Studies: The Evolution of a Discipline*, ed. Lucy Maddox (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 71. In Kuklick's influential essay, myth and symbol criticism, with its emphasis on the mental image, is seen as representing a "crude Cartesian view of the mind" (p. 73). Offering no explanation for why a Cartesian view of the mind (i.e., the view that thinking leads to being) could not offer at least one among many valid explanations of how the world works, the core of Kuklick's argument is made *ex hypothesi*.

6. Publisher's introduction to *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist* (New York: New York Review Books, 1999), xi.

7. See Richard Ohmann, *English in America: A Radical View of the Profession* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); Theodore Rozak, ed., *The Dissenting Academy* (New York: Pantheon, 1968); Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: The New Press, 2001); André Schiffrin, ed., *The Cold War and the University: Toward an Intellectual History of the Postwar Years* (New York: The New Press, 1997); and Ellen Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

8. John William Ward, *Red, White, and Blue: Men, Books, and Ideas in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 4.

9. *Ibid.*, vii.

10. *Ibid.*, 3.

11. *Ibid.*, 6.

12. *Ibid.*, 29.

13. *Ibid.*, 28. The influence of myth and symbol criticism on New Americanists appears evident in Ward's review of the press's response to Lindbergh. Just as Ward was seeking to untangle contradictions in the hegemonic myth of American individualism by analyzing its appearance in a dominant cultural text (the daily newspaper), New Americanists turn to myth and symbol texts (and other texts in early American studies) to perform the same operation, "deconstructing" these texts' valorizations of individualism as complicit in the Cold War. In the process, they reiterate their intellectual debt to the very school of thought they set out to criticize. Frederic Jameson, for instance, in *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981) cites the myth and symbol critic Northrop Frye as providing a precursor to his theory of the political unconscious, and the New Americanists cited above (see note 1) apply Jameson's theory in arguing that texts of Cold War criticism implicitly and underwrote a collective, unconscious *Pax Americana* consensus. However, where Ward saw the products of popular culture as enactive of hegemonic cultural ideologies and academics as failing in their duty to affect social change, as discussed later in this essay, New Left Americanists tended to view a handful of academic texts as negatively influential beyond their professional sphere of influence.

14. Ward, *Red, White, and Blue*, 35.

15. *Ibid.*, 227-228.

16. *Ibid.*, 213.

17. *Ibid.*, 219.

18. *Ibid.*, 225.

19. *Ibid.*, 250.

20. *Ibid.*, 250-251.

21. *Ibid.*, 260.

22. *Ibid.*, 265.

23. Ward's view of myths as most significant insofar as they form the basis of actions suggests a pragmatic view of the relationship between ideology and social justice evident in such early American studies intellectuals as Lewis Mumford, in Richard Rorty's liberal pragmatism, and in William James. In Mumford's view, the value of myths is that they *work* to affect action: "The nearest we can get to rationality is not to efface our myths but to attempt to infuse them with right reason, and to alter or exchange them for other myths when they appear to work badly." *The Story of Utopias* (New York: Viking Press, 1969), 301. For Rorty, national myths are an essential component of social justice, since they help us to "raise questions about our individual and national identity as part of a process of deciding . . . what we will try to become;" in other words, they guide us in our "attempts to forge a moral identity." *Achieving Our Country* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 11, 13. William James named this general view of the active role of deeply held concepts "the pragmatic rule," or the rule that "the meaning of a concept may always be found . . . in some particular difference in the course of human existence which its being true will make." *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*, ed. John J. McDermott (New York: Modern Library, 1968), 238.

24. Like Ward, Goodman expressed concern with the role of democracy in creating "like-mindedness," emphasized the need for academics to relate knowledge to action, and underscored the necessity for integrated individuals capable of forming institutions better able to serve them. See *Growing Up Absurd* (New York: Random House, 1960). Central to Goodman's thesis—that

America could reclaim its missed revolutions and thus improve the structure of society—was his call for “manly independence,” a term that invokes a nineteenth century style of rebellious individualism which, if Goodman’s analysis of the conformism and social malaise of the 1950s is to be believed, has been associated with America’s Cold War ideology erroneously.

25. Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: The New Press, 2001).

26. Ward, *Red, White, and Blue*, 318.

27. *Ibid.*, 320.

28. *Ibid.*, 321.

29. John William Ward, “Myth and Change,” Typed card, John William Ward Papers, Box 2, Folder 8, Amherst College Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library.

30. John William Ward, “K recognizes that such phrases,” Typed card, John William Ward Papers, Box 2, Folder 8, Amherst College Archives and Special Collections.

31. Ward, *Red, White, and Blue*, 328.

32. For more on the significance of anarchist thought on both the right and left in the 1960s, see David Deleon, “The American as Anarchist: Social Criticism in the 1960s,” *American Quarterly* 25, no. 5 (1973): 516-537.

33. Berkman, *Prison Memoirs*, iii.

34. John William Ward, introduction to Berkman, *Prison Memoirs*, xiii.

35. *Ibid.*, xii.

36. *Ibid.*, xxviii.

37. John William Ward, “Anarchy and Authority in American Literature,” in *Decline of the New*, ed. Irving Howe (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1970), 98.

38. *Ibid.*, 111.

39. Ward, introduction to Berkman, *Prison Memoirs*, xix.

40. *Ibid.*, xx.

41. *Ibid.*, xx, xxii.

42. See Jaques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes* (New York: Vintage, 1975).

43. Ward, introduction to Berkman, *Prison Memoirs*, xxvii.

44. *Ibid.*, xxvii.

45. *Ibid.*, xxvii-xxviii.

46. John William Ward, “To Whom Should I Write a Letter?,” *New York Times*, 13 May 1972, 31.

47. *Ibid.*

48. *Ibid.*

49. John William Ward, “Should College Presidents Take Stands on Sensitive Public Issues?,” 18 July 1973, John William Ward Papers, Box 1, Folder 23, Amherst College Archives and Special Collections.

50. *Ibid.*, 2. Cf., “The Meaning of Passive Civil Disobedience,” Sept 1972, John William Ward Papers, Box 1, Folder 16, Amherst College Archives and Special Collections, p. 3.

51. John William Ward, “The Committee for Public Justice,” 7-8 Nov 1972, Box 1, Folder 21, Amherst College Archives and Special Collections, p. 6.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

53. See note 1.

54. In *The Organization Man*, William Whyte described the mystifying, ideological use of individualism in the 1950s in terms similar to those explored in Ward’s work. For Whyte, individualism served as a psychological palliative for the organization man, a new kind of other-directed creature spawned in the wake of post-New Deal collectivist corporatism: “Only by using the language of individualism to describe the collective can the ‘organization man,’” Whyte wrote, “stave off the thought that he himself is in a collective as pervading as any ever dreamed of by the reformers, the intellectuals, and the utopian visionaries [such as Communists] he so regularly warns against.” Largely to blame for this state of affairs, Whyte argued, was the “human relations doctrine,” “which comes perilously close to demanding that the individual sacrifice his own beliefs that he may belong.” See William Whyte and Joseph Nocera, *The Organization Man* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 35-36, 5. David Riesman, meanwhile, argued that the inner-directed, individualistic ethos of “an earlier time” had been displaced in the early Cold War years by “an enormous ideological shift favoring submission to the group.” See David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, and Reuel Denney, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study in the Changing American Character*, rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 82. For “others” see, for instance, Paul Goodman, *Growing Up Absurd*, in note 24, and Kenneth Rexroth, *The World Outside My Window: The Selected Essays of Kenneth Rexroth*, ed. Bradford Morrow (New York: New Directions, 1987).