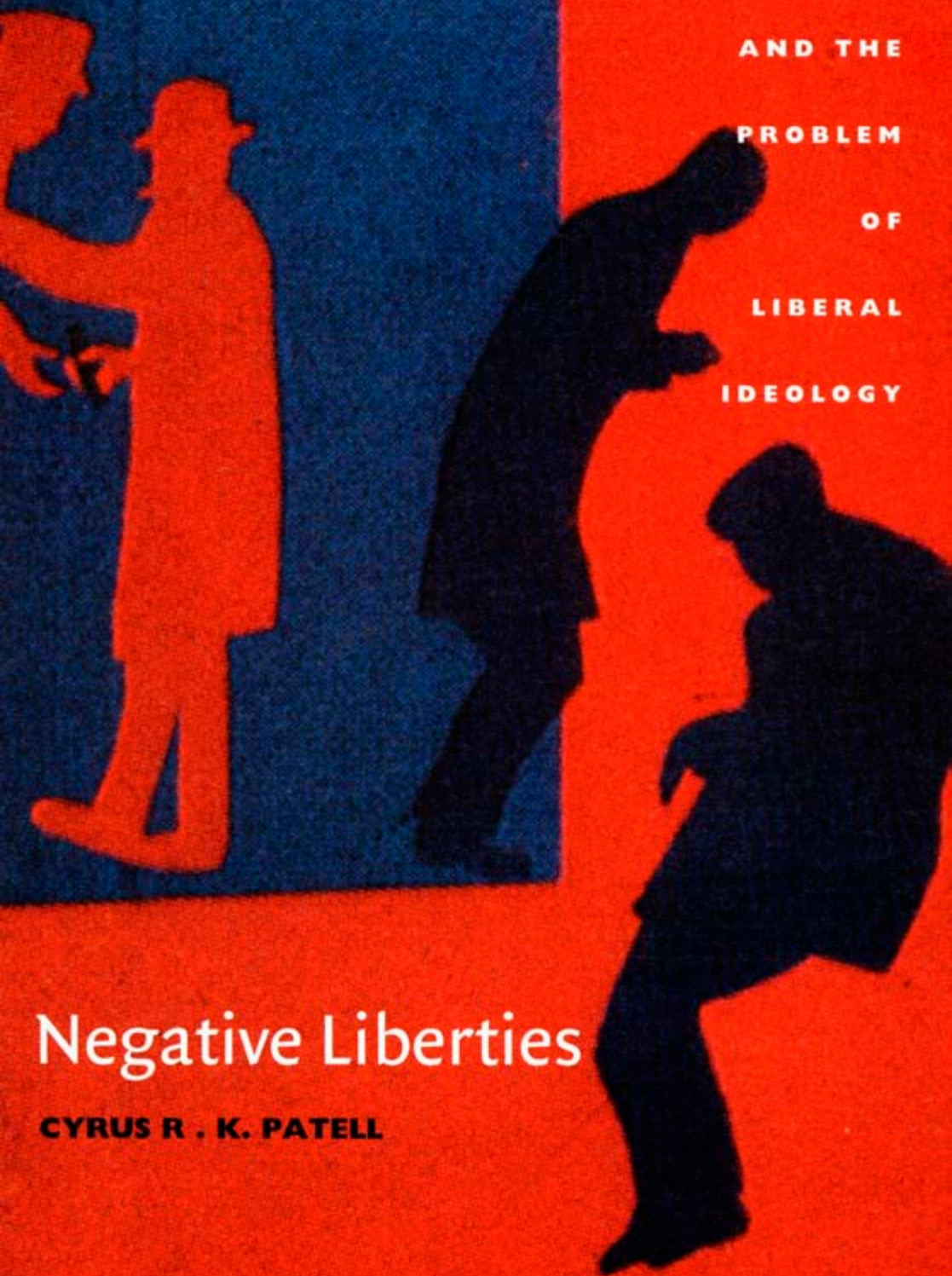


MORRISON,
PYNCHON,
AND THE
PROBLEM
OF
LIBERAL
IDEOLOGY

Negative Liberties

CYRUS R. K. PATELL



Negative Liberties

New Americanists

A Series Edited by Donald E. Pease

Negative Liberties

Morrison, Pynchon, and the Problem of Liberal Ideology

Cyrus R. K. Patell

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For Saki

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PREFACE

“These guys sound like Reagan.” An undergraduate said this to me during a tutorial sometime in the mid-1980s. He was talking about Emerson and Whitman.

I don’t know whether I put this idea into his head or he into mine, but I do know that my interest in the subject of *Negative Liberties* dates from the period now known as the *Reagan era*. Its roots lie in my amazement that so many Americans could find Ronald Reagan’s rhetoric to be so persuasive when I found it to be so patently full of rationalizations and deceptions. I had read Christopher Lasch’s best-selling study *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979), which claimed that “the culture of competitive individualism” was “a way of life that is dying” (21), destroyed by its own internal contradictions. But, everywhere I looked during the 1980s, I saw American popular culture celebrating individualism, led by Reagan, who described “the dream conceived by our Founding Fathers” as the achievement of “the ultimate in individual freedom consistent with an orderly society” (1989, 212–13). Garry Wills wrote that Reagan “believes the individualist myths that help him to play his communal role,” and he described Reagan as “the sincerest claimant to a heritage that never existed, a perfect blend of an authentic America he grew up in and of that America’s own fables about its past” (1987, 94). What was it that was so appealing about this rhetoric, that could lead American voters to say, as one retired brewery worker did after the 1984 election, “He really isn’t like a Republican. He’s more like an American, which is what we really need”?¹

In speech after speech throughout his political career, Reagan managed to appropriate communal symbols and bend them to serve individualist ends, the most prominent example being his description of the United States as a “shining city upon a hill.” He used the phrase in a 1977 speech to the American Conservative Union, declaring “that the preservation and enhancement of the values that strengthen and protect individual freedom, family life, communities, and neighborhoods and the liberty of our beloved nation should be at the heart of any legislative or political program presented to the American people” (1984, 192). Asserting that “liberty can be measured by how much freedom Americans have to make their own decisions—even their mistakes,” Reagan reached the conclusion that the Republican party “must be the party of the individual. It must not sell out the individual to cater to the group. No greater challenge faces our society today than insuring that each one of us can maintain his dignity and his identity in an increasingly complex, centralized society. . . . Then with God’s help we shall indeed be as a city upon a hill with the eyes of all people upon us” (200–201).

Reagan’s appropriation here (and in later speeches) of the symbol of “the shining city upon a hill” inverts the logic of John Winthrop’s sermon “A Modell of Christian Charity” (1630), which had stressed the primacy of the community’s needs over those of any individual. “Wee must delight in eache other,” Winthrop told his fellow colonists on board the *Arbella*, “make others Conditions our owne[,] reioyce together, mourne together, labour, and suffer together, allwayes haueing before our eyes our Commis-sion and Community in the worke, our Community as members of the same body” (294). In Reagan’s retelling of Winthrop’s message, the individual assumes primacy over the community, and Winthrop himself becomes a rugged individualist: “What he imagined was important because he was an early Pilgrim, an early freedom man. He journeyed here on what today we’d call a little wooden boat; and like the other Pilgrims, he was looking for a home that would be free” (1989, 417).

I began to realize why Ronald Reagan was perceived as “the Great Communicator”: not because he rendered the complexities of policy comprehensible to the average citizen (he did not), but because he told stories that average citizens wanted to hear, stories based on a consistently individualist interpretation of what it means to be an American. What Reagan was offering in its most simplified form was a story about the idea of individualism that seemed to have attained a hegemonic force in U.S. culture, that

seemed to have become one of those official stories that serve as the foundation for cultural consensus.

Reagan often quoted Winthrop, but to my knowledge he did not quote Emerson until late in his presidency (at the 1987 summit with Gorbachev). Nevertheless, my student and I were not alone in making a connection between Emerson and Reagan.² In a controversial address given to the Yale senior class in 1981 (and later published in essay form under the title “Power, Politics, and a Sense of History”), A. Bartlett Giamatti—then president of Yale University—worried about Emerson’s valorization of the individual. Tracing the genealogy of Reaganism back to Emersonianism, Giamatti argued that “we are afflicted now, and have been for some time, with solo operators for whom nothing is complex, because nothing is connected to anything else; who believe the function of government is to impose moralistic schemes rather than to forge complex consensuses, and who treat government as an impediment to mandating purity rather than as a means of connecting, and negotiating among, legitimate needs and achieving a practical equitable balance” (99). Giamatti situated the origin of “this worship of power as force, this contempt for restraining or complex connections and the consequent devaluation of political life,” in the years after the Civil War, when “prophets of the secular religion that was the new America” were able “to bypass the Founders and to summon up the original strength of Puritan America and to hurl that strength, naked, squalling as if newborn, into the gathering darkness.” Singling out Emerson because he “was a potent figure in his time, and his influence is powerful to this day,” Giamatti claimed that Emerson has been misunderstood: “You do not have to read the prophet to realize his ideas are all around us. Strangely enough, he lives in the popular imagination as the Lover of Nature, a sweet, sentimental, Yankee Kahlil Gibran. In fact, Emerson is as sweet as barbed wire, and his sentimentality as accommodating as a brick” (102).

I agree with Giamatti that Emerson’s influence remains “powerful to this day.” He was a major contributor to the national narrative that Reagan presented in simplified form throughout his career. And I agree that we have tended to misunderstand Emerson. I am just not sure, however, that I agree about the precise way in which he has been misunderstood.

Let me give you an example of how the popular imagination tends to conceive of Emerson. In the fall of 1988, the Reebok Corporation ran an advertising campaign for its athletic shoes based on the slogan “Reeboks

Let U. B. U.” The television commercials that spearheaded this campaign were shot in bright primary colors and, over a sound track of tango music played on violin and piano, presented the viewer with a montage of brief scenes featuring people dressed in idiosyncratic attire and behaving in idiosyncratic, even eccentric, ways. Each scene was accompanied by a spoken caption drawn from Emerson’s famous essay “Self-Reliance”—“Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist. . . . A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds. . . . To be great is to be misunderstood . . .”—a total of ten captions in all. The ad campaign raised the hackles of the daily newspaper at Emerson’s alma mater: the *Harvard Crimson* ran an opinion piece entitled “Stomping on Individualism” that deplored this appropriation of the work of the man whose name adorns the university’s philosophy building. “The postmodern randomness of the ads is meant to stress individuality and uniqueness, as does Emerson’s philosophy,” writes the author of the piece. But, she complains, “the ads distort that philosophy by implying that Emersonian self-reliance can be found in, of all things, sneakers.” Describing Emerson as “the quintessential American philosopher” (a disputed claim in departments of philosophy, including the one housed in Harvard’s Emerson Hall), the author argues that the campaign emphasizes “the crucially American dialectic of individual versus community.” She claims, however, that the ads are based “on a duplicitous premise” because they “deftly obscure . . . the fact that buying Reeboks is not an act of individualism but an act of conformity” (Brosh, 2).

By extolling the virtues of an authentic “individualism” while sneering at “conformity,” the author of the *Crimson* piece places herself squarely within the ideological tradition that has dominated American culture since the early part of the nineteenth century. What she fails to realize, however, is that conformity is crucial to U.S. individualism, which, like all ideologies, serves the function of creating and perpetuating consensus among the members of a particular community or group. The existence of an *ideology of individualism* may at first appear to be a paradox since individualism would seem to be diametrically opposed to any form of social control. But, as we shall see, from the time that the term became a part of the American vocabulary in the early part of the nineteenth century, Americans—including Emerson and his followers—have always conceived of *individualism* as a social formation. Herein lies the genius of the ideology and perhaps the reason for its efficacy: it enforces conformity at the very moment that it extols individuality. The very fact that we conceive of Emerson as a proponent of “solo operators” rather than as a social theorist is a testament to

the general acceptance in U.S. culture of the particular social theory that he advocates.

In the pages that follow, I will argue that the problem with U.S. liberal ideology today is its ongoing reliance on Emersonian modes of thinking. I will use the term *Emersonian liberalism* to signify, first, the liberal philosophical tradition that has arisen in the United States around the idea of self-reliance, a tradition that represents the crystallization of what might be called the official narrative of U.S. individualism. I will also use the term to signify the popular, individualist mythologies that either accompany Emersonianism or are promoted by it. Emersonian liberalism is perhaps the most powerful version of U.S. liberal ideology, and it provides what amounts to a national narrative that teaches us to think in what social scientists call *methodologically individualist* terms. As I will discuss in greater detail in the first chapter, methodological individualism is the idea that all explanations of either individual or social phenomena are valid only insofar as they are grounded in facts about individuals. What I hope to show in the course of *Negative Liberties* is that Americans have become overly reliant on methodological individualism when they think about social problems. Many of the most nettlesome social problems facing Americans today prove resistant to methodologically individualist solutions and therefore seem to us to be insolvable.

Take, for example, the debates over affirmative action. The label *affirmative action* refers to a broad spectrum of programs designed to reverse the effects of systemic discrimination; according to Stephen L. Wasby, “the concept subsumes a set of programs ranging from, at its mildest, wide advertising of positions to prompt more people to apply or extensive recruitment of potential applicants, through the use of ranges and goals in hiring, to, ultimately, at its most severe, the use of fixed hiring and promotion” (ix–x). The most frequent line of attack against affirmative action is what Ronald J. Fiscus describes in *The Constitutional Logic of Affirmative Action* as the “innocent persons” argument: “The charge is that such programs are always unfair to the individuals (white or male) against whom the preferential treatment is directed, unless those individuals themselves participated in the discrimination against the now-preferred minorities. If they have not personally participated in the particular discrimination in question, then they are considered innocent, and the imposition of an affirmative action quota that disadvantages them is considered an unfair act of discrimination against them simply because they are white or male” (4).

During the Reagan administration, this type of argument generally

took one of two forms. Frequently, the Justice Department argued that affirmative-action programs violate the Fourteenth Amendment's guarantee of equal protection if they have the effect of taking away a right or a benefit from an individual who was not *personally* guilty of discriminating against the victims of discrimination. At other times, the Justice Department claimed that affirmative-action programs must be restricted to restoring rights or benefits only to "the actual victims of discrimination," to those individuals who can demonstrate that they have been *personally* discriminated against by the entity instituting the program (Fiscus, 46–47). The reaction of the average citizen to affirmative action also typically turns on "actual" individual cases. For example, Vangie Pepper, a Washington State woman interviewed about an anti-affirmative-action ballot initiative, finds it difficult to abandon methodological individualism in the case of her own daughter: "I have always been for affirmative action. If all things are equal you should probably have some kind of affirmative action. But should my daughter not get into school because of it?" (S. A. Holmes, A15). Such arguments are examples of methodologically individualist responses to a problem that demands consideration at the level of the group because it is a matter of group-oriented discrimination. Behind any group-oriented form of discrimination such as racism, sexism, or homophobia lies the unacknowledged abandonment of methodological individualism; predictably, when methodological individualism is invoked in the search for solutions to such problems, it proves to be ineffective.³

There is, however, a difference between Emerson's methodological individualism and the reasoning that tends to accompany criticisms of affirmative action. In reframing questions of social choice as questions of individual choice, Emerson tends to describe *the individual* in abstract terms that strip away characteristics, such as gender, race, ethnicity, and class, that we generally consider to be essential parts of our individual identities. In contrast, the methodological individualism that is deployed in today's sociocultural debates often presents particular individual life stories as evidence, relying on a specificity that Emerson avoids in those moments when he might be said to be engaging in political philosophy. The strategy of invoking particular life stories as a form of political discourse draws on what I hope to show is a crucial fact about human culture: its epistemological reliance on storytelling and the creation of narratives.

I will side with those philosophers who argue that philosophy is a form of storytelling, but I will also suggest that philosophy is often insufficiently fictional. In order to attain the goal of internal consistency through the

resolution of contradictions and conflicts, philosophy often presents a view of culture that is either simplified or abstracted or both. Such, I will argue, is the case with the abstract conception of the individual presented by Emerson in the nineteenth century and by John Rawls and George Kateb in the twentieth. The invocation of particular life stories remedies some of that abstraction, but it also involves an oversimplification: it generally fails to account for the larger sociocultural contexts within which those life stories must be placed if we are to understand their full significance. Methodological individualism prevents us from doing that contextualizing, in part because it dismisses many sociocultural contexts as irrelevant.

One of the goals of *Negative Liberties* is to revise the traditional view of mainstream liberal political theory by arguing that Rawls must be considered together with Emerson and that the two thinkers share philosophical strategies. Emersonian liberalism, in other words, encompasses not only the overt Emersonianism of a thinker like Kateb but also the varieties of individualism espoused by thinkers like Rawls. Acknowledged or not, Emersonianism is the ground upon which contemporary U.S. liberal theory is built.

In addition, I hope to show that some of the most important philosophizing that is going on within late twentieth-century U.S. culture can be found in works of fiction, particularly those works of fiction that we take to be exemplars of literary art. Toni Morrison and Thomas Pynchon are two novelists whose writings have gained them notice as preeminent literary artists. I argue that their literary art arises from an intimate engagement with cultural politics and in particular with the ideology of Emersonian liberalism. Their novels demonstrate why such contemporary philosophers as Ronald Beiner, Stanley Cavell, Alasdair MacIntyre, Martha Nussbaum, Richard Rorty, Michael J. Sandel, Steven Shiffrin, and Judith Shklar have argued that professional philosophy has much to learn from literature's ability to dramatize the complexities and idiosyncrasies of human life. I do not mean to argue that literature enables us to come up with abstract solutions that philosophy cannot supply. Rather, I argue that literature's ability to dramatize philosophical situations enables it to be persuasive about the benefits and costs of particular philosophical arrangements in a way that philosophy cannot be. Literature brings philosophy to life.

Thinking about the costs and benefits of the individualistic tradition represented by Emersonian liberalism, I find myself in agreement with Chantal Mouffe's belief that we must "redress the negative consequences of individualism" (1992, 5) by dissociating "the liberal ideals of individual

freedom and personal autonomy” from “the other discourses to which they have been articulated” (1993, 7). Mouffe argues that liberalism’s major contribution to modern democratic theory is its emphasis on cultural and political pluralism. The challenge, as I see it, is to theorize forms of individual and communal identity that can draw on pluralism’s respect for the dignity of others without slipping into a cultural relativism that prevents us from making philosophical judgments. The triumph of multiculturalism within the U.S. academy in recent years is too often reflected in precisely this sort of cultural relativism, which assumes that an epistemological divide lies between different subject positions, a divide that prevents us from either truly empathizing with or justly criticizing those who occupy subject positions that are significantly different from our own.⁴

Thomas Pynchon and Toni Morrison are typically taken to be authors who occupy radically different subject positions. They are the two most celebrated American novelists of the late twentieth century, canonized postmodernists whose writings have become staples of college English curricula as well as best-sellers, yet critics routinely assign them to separate pigeonholes and thus rarely find cause to consider their novels together.⁵ Critics seem to believe that, because Morrison and Pynchon write from what appear to be diametrically opposed authorial subject positions, they must appeal primarily to quite different interpretive communities. Pynchon, after all, is a white male, a descendant of the Puritan Fathers, who guards his privacy jealously, never gives interviews, and publishes rarely. In contrast, Morrison is a woman descended from African American slaves who is not only a prolific novelist and winner of both the Nobel and the Pulitzer Prizes but also a professor at a prominent university; she grants interviews, gives lectures around the country, and has donned the mantle of the public intellectual.

In the current critical climate, the differences in their personal genealogies and their approaches to intellectual life prevent Morrison and Pynchon from being compared to one another, despite the readily apparent formal affinities between their bodies of work. Their novels are experimental and self-consciously difficult pieces of prose that revel in the resources of language and firmly situate themselves within the horizon of postmodernist aesthetics, a stance that becomes immediately apparent as soon as one opens their respective first novels (published seven years apart).⁶ Sometimes choppy and harsh, at other times lyrical and mellifluous, their prose styles frequently combine the beautiful and the appalling to create striking

images that gnaw at the reader's imagination. In each case, however, this aesthetic prowess is part of an outlook that is deeply political: the novels of Pynchon and Morrison embody a conviction that great art can be simultaneously timeless and time bound, that it can break through to what is transcendent in the human experience by engaging the specific cultural and political issues of its time and place. Their novels and essays bear out Linda Hutcheon's argument about the nature of postmodernism: that it is "engaged in contesting the modernist (humanist) premises of art's apolitical autonomy and of theory and criticism as value-free activities." According to Hutcheon, postmodernist texts teach us "that representation cannot be avoided, but it can be studied to show how it legitimates certain kinds of knowledge and, therefore, certain kinds of power" (230).

By arguing that postmodernism does not depict some generalized condition of subjectivity but rather engages with particular kinds of knowledge and power, Hutcheon here corrects a critical commonplace about postmodernism. Phillip Brian Harper summarizes this view by arguing that "postmodern theory suggests that our sense of the individual human psyche as an integrated whole is a necessary misconception, and that various technological, economic, and philosophical developments of the late twentieth century demonstrate to us the psyche's fundamentally incoherent and fragmentary, or 'decentered,' nature." Harper proposes that, for authors like Morrison, whose work arises out of historical conditions of "social marginality," there is nothing specifically "postmodern" about the experience of fragmented subjectivity; in other words, the "general condition" of fragmentation depicted in postmodern texts "simulates the experience of disenfranchised groups" (29). Although Harper does not treat Morrison's work, his arguments about Maxine Hong Kingston might well be applied to Morrison: "The sociopolitical engagement that Kingston's work . . . manifests effectively sets it apart from the rather more canonized works of postmodern fiction with whom it nonetheless shares key narrative strategies, indicating not that Kingston's work is any the less postmodernist but rather that the criteria according to which certain works are recognized as exemplarily postmodern do not sufficiently engage the sociopolitical issues that are unavoidably implicated in the concept, and thus fall short of constituting its full theorization" (186). Pynchon is among the authors whom Harper includes among the "canonized" postmodernists, and Harper draws a distinction between Pynchon and writers who write from positions of social marginality by suggesting that Pynchon

is not interested in “personalizing the crisis of self-cognition” (171). What I will argue below, however, is that Pynchon is, in fact, far more interested in the subjectivities of the disenfranchised than critics have generally been willing to recognize.

To take Pynchon and Morrison seriously as political novelists requires us to understand the ways in which their works engage the official narrative generated by Emersonian liberalism. Their texts pull apart, deconstruct, and reimagine this official narrative, exploring in palpable detail what it means to live in a culture of Emersonian individualism, investigating its benefits and costs, its victories and tragedies, and the kinds of knowledge and power that it promotes. Both novelists portray characters who yearn for what Michael Sandel calls the “powerful liberating vision” of a self that is “free and independent, unencumbered by aims and attachments it does not choose for itself” (1996, 12). Morrison’s texts celebrate freedom even when its costs are extraordinarily high, when it is achieved at the expense of community or equal treatment for women. Pynchon’s novels view freedom as an endangered value on the verge of extinction in a complex modern world driven by the exigencies of economic gain and technological progress. Both authors depict cultures in which the institutions that are supposed to safeguard freedom have in fact been complicit in its erosion. Their fictions show us that there is nothing inevitable about the happy ending that U.S. culture has grafted onto its official story about self-reliance and the nature of individual freedom. Philosophers like Emerson, Rawls, and Kateb make compelling cases for the potential of individualism as the basis for an ideal democratic society, but as Pynchon and Morrison so dramatically depict, this potential has yet to be realized in American culture, let alone elsewhere in the world.

The story told by Emersonian liberalism is an idealized narrative, an abstraction in which a great many variables are held constant. Morrison and Pynchon force us to think about precisely what has been left out of this narrative. They ask us to recognize that this narrative is a cultural myth; they ask us to measure it against a set of stories that do not end quite so well, stories about those who are disenfranchised, marginalized, and brutalized by the dominant culture even as that dominant culture celebrates its basis in the protection of individual rights.

In chapter 1, I examine the relation between philosophy and official cultural narratives and argue that literary narratives afford us a way of recognizing the limitations of those two forms of discourse. I contend that the tradition of individualism exemplified by Emersonian liberalism ren-

ders complementary two conceptions of the nature of freedom that political theorists generally regard as oppositional. The idealizing narrative promoted by Emersonian liberalism promises that self-interest does not conflict with communal interest, that the pursuit of self-interest serves, in fact, as the foundation for the ideals of both community and nationality. And I suggest that critics of this national narrative have tended to fall into two camps: those who believe, on the one hand, that individualism is flawed conceptually and must be eschewed and those who believe, on the other hand, that individualism is a leap forward for human culture and has simply not been sufficiently put into practice.

In chapter 2, I examine the strengths and shortcomings of the particular conception of individualism that lies at the heart of Emerson's philosophy. I then link Emerson's ideas to the theory of justice developed by John Rawls, generally regarded by political theorists as the definitive philosophical statement of individualism in the twentieth century, and I examine George Kateb's attempts to fuse the work of these two thinkers by developing a concept that he calls *democratic individuality*. All these descriptions of individualism suffer, I will suggest, from the abstraction of their philosophical methods, and they fail to provide U.S. culture with adequate conceptual tools for abiding social problems that prove resistant to methodologically individualist description and solutions. Ironically, one solution to this abiding problem within Emersonian liberalism is actually embedded within Emerson's writing. Emerson's rhetorical style, with its eclectic borrowings from a truly global field of reference, offers us a cosmopolitan model of thinking that Emerson himself cannot fully realize. His modes of philosophical abstraction promote in the end not cosmopolitanism but a universalism that has much to tell us about the ways in which we are all the same, but little to tell us about the ways in which we are also all different from one another.

In chapters 3 and 4, I look at the ways in which the novels of Morrison and Pynchon engage the complex cultural dynamics both embodied and effaced by the official narratives generated by Emersonian liberalism. Moreover, I will argue that Morrison and Pynchon are building upon an implicit recognition of the limitations of Emersonian universalism and upon the promise of an Emersonian cosmopolitanism. Chapter 3, "Unenlightened Enlightenment," looks at the ways in which both writers dramatize those flaws that arise from liberalism's Enlightenment inheritance, namely, its overreliance on rationalism and its blindness to its relation with forms of domination such as slavery, racism, and misogyny. At the same

time, however, I demonstrate that both Morrison and Pynchon are strongly drawn to the overarching goals of Emersonian liberalism and therefore the power of its ways of thinking about freedom—sometimes despite themselves. In chapter 4, “Contemplating Community,” I argue that neither Morrison nor Pynchon finds safe refuge in the idea of community: both writers dramatize situations in which community has been corrupted by its connection to the negative aspects of individualism and in which communities marginalized within the narrative of U.S. individualism create counternarratives that prove to be equally oppressive. My conclusion suggests that, by dramatizing both the power and the limitations of Emersonian liberalism, Morrison’s and Pynchon’s writings provide us with intellectual resources that might help us break the impasse between those thinkers who believe that there is too much individualism in U.S. culture and those who believe that there is too little. Their writings point to the necessity of conceiving individual, communal, and national components of identity in cosmopolitan terms that respect both the differences between individuals and the links that connect them.

This project has evolved greatly since its genesis as a doctoral dissertation. An earlier version of chapter 2 was published in *Nineteenth-Century Literature* (48 [March 1994]: 440–79) as “Emersonian Strategies: Negative Liberty, Self-Reliance, and Democratic Individuality.” I am grateful to the University of California Press for permission to reprint the essay in its expanded and revised form here.

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like the person I have always wanted to be. Our life together is an object lesson in why unencumbered selves are selves that are woefully incomplete.

My work on individualism had its genesis one afternoon years ago in a seminar taught by Sacvan Bercovitch. Since then he has been a mentor, a friend, and a tireless advocate. In acknowledgement of all that he has meant to my scholarly career, I dedicate this book to him.

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Negative Liberties

ONE. Narrating Individualism

St. Augustine sets the problem. Mankind has, in its sin, two freedoms, to choose and to choose rightly. It cannot do the second without Divine Grace. Even if we could believe in that, it would not come to us in the ordinary course of history. In the absence of such a god, we are left with what we now call *negative liberty*, but there is no great joy in that for many political theorists, even those who recognize that positive liberty in the hands of human, not divine, hands is an invitation to unrestrained coercion.—Judith N. Shklar (1987)

The problem . . . is that the Constitution is a charter of negative rather than positive liberties. . . . The men who wrote the Bill of Rights were not concerned that government might do too little for the people, but that it might do too much to them.—Richard Posner, *Jackson v. City of Joliet* (1983)

When the communitarians attack liberal society, they are really attacking individualism, because to them it represents the heart of liberalism.—George Kateb (1992)

Two-thirds of the way through Thomas Pynchon's novel *Mason & Dixon* (1997), a Chinese Feng-Shui expert named "Capt. Zhang" looks with dismay upon the "Visto"—the line that the novel's protagonists have been hewing through the American wilderness: "Terrible Feng-Shui here. Worst I ever saw. You two crazy?" Arguing that "ev'rywhere else on earth, Boundaries follow Nature . . . so honoring the Dragon or Shan within, from which the Landscape ever takes its form," Zhang declares that "to mark a right Line upon the Earth is to inflict upon the Dragon's flesh a sword slash, a long,

perfect scar, impossible for any who live out here the year 'round to see as other than hateful Assault" (542; my ellipsis). Later he will tell the surveyors that their Visto may well be "an Agent of Darkness": "To rule forever . . . it is necessary only to create, among the people one would rule, what we call . . . Bad History. Nothing will produce Bad History more directly nor brutally, than drawing a Line, in particular a Right Line, the very Shape of Content, through the midst of a people,—to create thus a Distinction betwixt 'em,—'tis the first stroke.—All else will follow as if predestin'd, unto War and Devastation" (615; Pynchon's ellipses). Pynchon's earlier novels abound with examples of Bad History at work, from the European incursions into Southwest Africa depicted in *V.* (1963) to Brock Vond's attempts to impose a restrictive communitarian culture on the United States in *Vineland* (1990).

Toni Morrison is another writer who knows all about Bad History and about distinctions between peoples. Her most recent novel, *Paradise* (1998), is set in the all-black town of Ruby, Oklahoma (population 360), whose inhabitants have drawn a line between themselves and the outside world. Morrison describes Ruby as "a sleepy town with three churches within one mile of one another but nothing to serve a traveler: no diner, no police, no gas station, no public phone, no movie house, no hospital" (12). It is a town whose obsession with its own history and traditions is personified in its leading citizens Deacon and Steward Morgan, twin brothers who "have powerful memories," who "between them . . . remember the details of everything that ever happened—things they witnessed and things they have not," who remember above all the "controlling" story "told to them by their grandfather," a story that "explained" why the inhabitants of Ruby could not "tolerate anybody but themselves" (13). It is a story about racism—by whites against blacks, by blacks against blacks—that leads the town to mimic the intolerance once directed against them. In *Paradise*, as in her earlier novels *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), and *Beloved* (1987), Morrison shows how black communities subjected to Bad History create bad histories of their own. Morrison's novels indict black communities for the perpetuation of Bad History, but they trace the genealogy of the problem back to the racist narratives generated throughout U.S. history by a dominant culture ruled by whites.

Bad Histories and Official Stories

Morrison confronts the specter of Bad History directly in her introduction to the anthology *Birth of a Nation'hood* (1997). She looks at the events sur-