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Liberal Futures? Emotional Investment, Surplus Value, and The Forsythe Saga

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IN HIS PREFACE TO *The Liberal Imagination* (1950), Lionel Trilling articulates what has since become a common point of departure for discussions of liberalism and literary culture. Concerned with the increasing tendency within liberalism to “organize the elements of life in a rational way,” he sees it drifting “toward a denial of the emotions and the imagination.” Significantly, though, Trilling does not see a fundamental opposition between liberalism and the emotions. Rather, they stand in a paradoxical relation to each other: “The paradox is that liberalism is concerned with the emotions above all else, as proof of which the word happiness stands at the very centre of its thought, but in its effort to establish the emotions, or certain among them, in some sort of freedom, liberalism somehow tends to deny them in their full possibility.” The task for Trilling is to recuperate this “full possibility” for what has become an increasingly abstract and ratiocinated liberalism, and he sees modern literature, which, at heart, has a “bone to pick with the rational intellect,” as laying down the challenge for liberalism in the twentieth century. As he puts it in “The Meaning of a Literary Idea,” the last essay in *The Liberal Imagination*, modern writers demand of liberal democrats “a great agility and ingenuity in coping with their antagonism to our social and political ideals.”¹

He explores this antagonism more fully in the essays in *Beyond Culture* (1965) and later *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1974). Underlying it is what he calls “the adversary intention” of modern literature, “the disenchantment of culture with culture itself.” Whereas in Arnold’s liberalism, the modern means “repose, confidence, tolerance and the critical spirit,” Trilling understands the twentieth-century modern to refer to those works that view civilization’s order as “achieved

¹ Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), 14, 13, 12, 38, 299.



at the cost of extravagant personal repression, either that of coercion or that of acquiescence; its repose otiose; its tolerance either flaccid or capricious.” He develops his account of modern literature’s adversary intention through several lines of argument. Perhaps the chief of these is his analysis of the fate of pleasure, in the essay of that name. The idea of pleasure, he argues, was a fundamental aspect of the emergence of bourgeois society in the eighteenth century and became, in its different registers, a key criterion of Romantic and post-Romantic literature. But whereas “modern societies seek to fulfil themselves in affluence, which of course implies the possibility of pleasure,” “for the modern [literary] sensibility it is inadmissible and even repulsive,” and “this divided state of feeling may be exposed in terms of a breach between politics and art.” Trilling develops this theme in a brief account of Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* (1861), which most clearly exemplifies “the repudiation of pleasure in favour of the gratification which may be found in unpleasure,” and whose conclusions, he believes, “have established themselves not only as parts of our moral culture but as its essence.”²

For Trilling, the cut to liberalism is that “the disgust with the specious good of pleasure” is inherently a critique of a rationally organized society, “a society organized in the service of pleasure,” a liberal society, comprising “the habits, manners, and ‘values’ of the bourgeois world.” Against this society are writers, like Dostoevsky and Nietzsche, who crave “more life” and who, in the project of what he calls a “spiritual militancy,” are prepared to “destroy” the ideals of an anodyne liberal humanism.³ The great challenge for a liberal like Trilling is how to deal with this “division that has developed between modern literature and a rational and positive politics,”⁴ a division that also lies at the heart of later arguments by Robert Pippin and, following him, Amanda Anderson.⁵ Albeit in a different register, it is, of course, also central to Freud’s concern in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1929), a book that was particularly influential on Trilling.

At first blush, Trilling’s arguments about the adversarial relation of modern literature to a liberal society might seem odd in a discussion of John Galsworthy. Often the target of his modernist compeers’ criticism, Galsworthy’s fiction would appear to exemplify precisely the kind of Arnoldian liberalism that Trilling sees in terms of “repose, confidence, tolerance and the critical spirit.” These elements—at least the latter two—permeate his fiction, and in *The Forsyte Saga* they are key features of probably his most sympathetic character, young Jolyon. On the surface, the deep personal differences between old and young Jolyon’s side of the family and that of Soames (the “man of property” of the first book) seem to embody just those value clashes that Martin Wiener drew attention to many years ago in *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit*.⁶ Their distaste for Soames, manifested not just as ideological difference but as visceral distaste, exemplifies Arnold’s critique of “our Liberal practitioners” in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). Arnold had in his sights classic mid-Victorian “manufacturing” liberalism, particularly its Nonconformist Manchester form, and Soames is characterized by the rigidity and repression of impulses that Arnold saw in that variant of liberalism. However, Soames does not strictly represent this target.

² Lionel Trilling, *Beyond Culture: Essays on Literature and Learning* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967), 12, 19, 29, 30, 70, 74, 75.

³ See *ibid.*, 77–79.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁵ See Robert Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem: On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1991); Amanda Anderson, “Victorian Studies and the Two Modernities,” *Victorian Studies* 47, no. 2 (2005): 195–203.

⁶ Martin Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

He is an Anglican, a member of the professional upper middle class, and makes his money from his legal practice and his careful investments, not from manufacturing. It is no longer the 1860s but the 1880s and 1890s, and he is a consumer rather than a producer or manufacturer. Indeed, it is old and young Jolyon who are still the “producers.” This is played out even in the case of taste, where old Jolyon’s literal taste was a pivotal factor in the success of his tea business and young Jolyon is a successful watercolorist; Soames, on the other hand, simply collects works of art, along with his other possessions. Soames is as immersed in culture as are old and young Jolyon, but the overall thrust of the narrative makes clear Galsworthy’s “disenchantment with culture,” to use Trilling’s phrase, when culture is conceived in the consumerist world of a Soames Forsyte.

In short, while the binaries that drive much of the narrative appear to replicate the nineteenth-century cultural critique of money and “machinery,” those binaries are complicated throughout *The Forsyte Saga*. Galsworthy’s liberalism is distinct from both its Arnoldian and (most overtly) its midcentury Mancunian antecedents. He is not “adversarial” in Trilling’s sense of the word, but like Dostoevsky, whom he admired, and Lawrence, who admired important aspects of his work, Galsworthy does offer a serious critique of the liberalism of rational self-interest that has so often been presented as the essence of liberalism since the 1850s up to the neo-liberalism of the last several decades. In this essay I argue that *The Forsyte Saga* generates this critique from within liberalism and that in it, like his New Liberal associates of the turn of the century, Galsworthy is exploring how liberal principles might be rethought in a dramatically changing world in ways that embrace the emotional life.

I am not suggesting that Galsworthy was a New Liberal in the strict political history sense. He might not even have been a Liberal (with capital L) in the strict party political sense. His early biographer Hermon Ould, for example, considered that “Galsworthy was not a politically minded man in spite of his keen interest in political measures and his astuteness in his judgment of them. No party claimed his definite allegiance and he rarely exercised his right to vote.”⁷ Geoffrey Harvey, though, notes that “although apolitical, Galsworthy at this period [around 1910] became associated in the public mind with the Liberal establishment.”⁸ By 1910 the “Liberal establishment” had taken on board a number of policies adumbrated by New Liberals, including those that provided some of the founding planks of what we have come to refer to as the Welfare State. To be associated with the Liberal establishment at this time was very much to be associated with New Liberals, several of whom had come into the new government with Campbell Bannerman’s election in 1906.

Following the success of *The Man of Property* (1906), Galsworthy’s reformist credentials during the later Edwardian years were consolidated largely through his plays, for which he was better known than for his fiction. Like Shaw and Granville Barker, who were also writing for the new Vedrenne-Barker management of the Court Theatre, he addressed a range of social issues there, including women’s rights, the legal system, and prison reform. He was also deeply involved in anti-censorship campaigns, writing to the Examiner of Plays in 1907 after Edward Garnett’s *The Breaking Point* was censored: “Garnett stirred me up, and I went to Barrie, and with Gilbert Murray we induced all the leading authors to sign a protest written by myself.”⁹

⁷ Hermon Ould, *John Galsworthy* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1934), 39.

⁸ Geoffrey Harvey, “John Galsworthy,” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, accessed 5 May 2015, www.oxforddnb.com.libraryproxy.griffith.edu.au.

⁹ H. V. Marrot, *Life and Letters of John Galsworthy* (London: Heinemann, 1935), 219.

His fiction, although less well known during this period, was also explicitly political. Apart from novels, he wrote short stories and “literary sketches,” many of which were published in the *Nation* (1907–23), the weekly review of politics and culture edited by Henry Massingham, around which gathered a significant network of advanced liberal journalists, novelists, and intellectuals. These included J. A. Hobson, L. T. Hobhouse, Charles Masterman, and others we now think of as “New Liberals.”¹⁰ The stories and sketches he published there, even though frequently tinged by pathos, were very much in keeping with the broad liberal democratic, reformist, and anti-market views of the others in the network. Galsworthy developed several friendships within the group, as well as with those on its edges, such as Edward and Constance Garnett and R. B. Cunninghame Graham. The latter and Henry Nevinson, one of the network’s more radical members, were co-campaigners with Galsworthy against cruelty to performing animals, a campaign they launched at Kensington Town Hall in 1913.¹¹ Galsworthy and Nevinson remained friends, both being founding members of PEN in 1921, with Galsworthy as its first president.

While he was no programmatic New Liberal, Galsworthy shared many of the values and ideals that characterized the broad group of reformists, radicals, lapsed Fabians, and quasi socialists who made up Massingham’s “advanced” liberal network. For the sake of convenience and recognition, I use the term “New Liberal” in the remainder of this essay, though its strict meaning is somewhat narrower than mine here.¹² The particular New Liberal lens through which I want to view Galsworthy is one in which excess and emotion were valorized as part of the whole personality. My point of purchase is Trilling’s assumption that “happiness” and “pleasure” are the emotions at the heart of liberalism. In making this claim, he is thinking primarily of the Utilitarian roots of liberalism and their manifestation in liberalism’s midcentury Mancunian variant. But as many scholars have demonstrated, the language and practices of Victorian liberalism grew out of a number of distinct (and sometimes countervailing) intellectual and religious traditions. Its Romantic and Evangelical roots are especially important to what we might loosely term “reformist” liberalism, the kind of liberalism we associate with J. S. Mill, T. H. Green, and the later New Liberals of the turn of the century.

Happiness was important but not the central driving principle for these liberals, as Mill makes clear in his *Autobiography* (1873), where he famously recounts how the poetry of Wordsworth enabled him to heal his breakdown caused by the barrenness of Utilitarianism as conceived by his father and Jeremy Bentham, for whom, we might recall, “pushpin” was as valuable as poetry. More important than happiness to Mill was the notion of “flourishing,” the idea—taken from Wilhelm von Humboldt—of the self as *Bildung* (meaning “self-education”). Here the self is conceived dynamically as the continuous expansion of human possibilities and the attempts to live them, with the aim being to achieve “the fullest possible realization of human

¹⁰ For an extended study of the Massingham network of advanced liberals, see Jock Macleod, *Literature, Journalism, and the Vocabularies of Liberalism: Politics and Letters, 1886–1916* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

¹¹ Cedric Watts and Laurence Davies, *Cunninghame Graham: A Critical Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 262.

¹² There is an enormous scholarship on the New Liberalism and on individual New Liberals from within political history, though very little from literary scholars. Useful overviews include Peter Clarke, *Liberals and Social Democrats* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); Michael Freedon, *The New Liberalism: An Ideology of Social Reform* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); Andrew Vincent, “The New Liberalism in Britain, 1880–1914,” *Australasian Journal of Politics and History* 36 (1990): 388–405.

potentialities.”¹³ Thus, in *On Liberty* (1859), he argued that “individual and social progress” was crucially dependent on the proliferation of diverse “experiments of living,” including “free scope” for “varieties of character” and “different modes of life.”¹⁴

In John Burrow’s words, these twin components of “individual self-development and the necessity for variety of circumstances” lie “at the centre of the progressive liberalism formulated in *On Liberty*.”¹⁵ They also lie at the center of later nineteenth-century progressive liberalism. Here is William Clarke, New Liberal journalist and editor of the short-lived *Progressive Review* in the 1890s and an early champion in England of Walt Whitman: “the great innovating thinkers and artists will always be ahead of [the community], and if they were not, they would be of no value.” Our acceptance of Whitman, he argues, “mainly depends on whether we accept the advent, welcome or unwelcome, of a new world. . . . Do we long for a larger, deeper life, for a richer experience, no matter how bought? Have we courage enough to quit the shallows for the deep blue?”¹⁶ Burrow neatly traces out some of the directions that these twin commitments to energy and striving, on the one hand, and variety of experience, on the other, were to take in the later decades of the nineteenth century, including the latter’s extreme forms in decadence. He also draws attention to Mill’s fear for the prospects for Western society as a whole, which, he argues: “Is seen not in terms of dramatic collapse but of a gradual, insidious process of entropy, produced by the power of conformity, and the stifling of all richly energetic individualities and the flattening of the variety of circumstances and experiences by which they are nourished.”¹⁷ As we will see below, Galsworthy too, especially in the later volumes of *The Forsyte Saga*, fears for the prospects for English society, which he traces through the disintegration of the Forsyte family from the 1880s to the 1920s. However, while an elegiac tone sometimes dominates his irony, Galsworthy’s principal concern is to map the decline of the Forsytes through a powerful critique of rational self-interest (and its associated “property” instinct) as professed in classic mid-Victorian “market” liberalism; and with this critique goes an analysis of its effects deep into the habitus of the upper middle classes.

The Forsyte Saga is the first trilogy of what was to become three trilogies that comprised *The Forsyte Chronicles*, eventually completed in 1933. Book 1 (*The Man of Property*, published in 1906) is set in 1886–87 and was originally a stand-alone novel. It was only after the First World War that Galsworthy conceived of the larger narrative over a long historical duration. This is when he wrote Book 2 (*In Chancery*, published in 1920), set in 1899–1901, and Book 3 (*To Let*, 1921), set in 1920. Between the three books come two interludes, *Indian Summer of a Forsyte*, set in the early nineties, and *Awakening*, set in 1909.

The Man of Property begins in 1886 with the engagement of June Forsyte to Philip Bosinney, an architect. Following Christine Bridgwood, Jean Radford argues that “in the saga, unlike romance, marriage is not the closure point to the narrative, but a starting point for new episodes—the

¹³ John Burrow, *The Crisis of Reason: European Thought, 1848–1914* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 131.

¹⁴ John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism, Liberty and Representative Government* (London: J. M. Dent, 1964), 115. The passages come from chapter 3, “Of Individuality, as One of the Elements of Well-Being.”

¹⁵ Burrow, *Crisis of Reason*, 153.

¹⁶ Herbert Burrows and J. A. Hobson, eds., *William Clarke: A Collection of His Writings* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1908), 39, 188–89.

¹⁷ Burrow, *Crisis of Reason*, 154.

story of the next generation.”¹⁸ However, the marriage contract between June and Philip is never completed, and the saga that follows is not so much a triumphalist story of new generations but a blighted one, where the original disruption to the saga’s putative starting point has consequences that impact negatively throughout the succeeding generations. June is the granddaughter of old Jolyon, the patriarch of the family, and the daughter of his son young Jolyon, who has been excluded from the family for leaving his wife (June’s mother) for another woman many years ago. There are ten siblings in old Jolyon’s generation, one of whom is James, the father of Soames,¹⁹ “the man of property” of the title. Soames’s wife is Irene, the spirit of beauty and passion in the novel. Irene finds Soames physically and emotionally repulsive and ultimately has an affair with Bosinney, who is building a house in the country (Robin Hill) for them. The possibility and then the certainty of this affair become a topic of gossip on Forsyte ‘Change, those family gatherings where information and opinions are exchanged. Finally, Soames asserts his physical conjugal rights over Irene, Bosinney dies under the wheels of a bus, and Irene leaves Soames. The story resumes five years later, with the first interlude. Old Jolyon is now the owner of Robin Hill, having bought it from Soames. In his eighty-fifth year, he kindles a friendship with Irene, based on his disgust at Soames’s actions and his appreciation of her beauty. The interlude concludes with his death and the information that he has left money in his will for Irene to live safely. Book 2 (*In Chancery*) takes up the story at the end of the decade. Young Jolyon has been designated the trustee for Irene’s funds, and they slowly build a friendship. At the same time, Soames is eager to have a son to continue his line, and when Irene rejects his suggestions to return to him, he looks for evidence to divorce her so he can marry Annette, a young French girl whom he has met. Ultimately, Jolyon and Irene provide the evidence, the divorce goes ahead, and Soames remarries. Young Jolyon’s son from his second marriage, Jolly, goes off to fight in the Boer War after an altercation with his cousin Val Dartie, Soames’s nephew, and dies there. Book 2 ends with the marriage between young Jolyon and Irene and the birth of Fleur to Soames and Annette. The second interlude is set in 1909 and concerns the awakening of Jon, the son of young Jolyon and Irene, to the experience of beauty. Book 3 (*To Let*) is built largely around the “fourth generation,” particularly the relationship between Fleur and Jon. This is a relationship that, despite their best efforts, is blighted before it can grow because of the history between Soames and Irene. Instead of being the mechanism by which the warring factions of the family come together in marriage, the relationship ultimately serves to reinforce the opposing values attributed to the factions and confirms the split for another generation. Fleur ends up marrying Michael Mont, the son of a baronet, while young Jolyon dies and Robin Hill goes up for sale or “to let.”

If this sounds a lot like a potboiler, it is; and there are plenty of clichés in the *Forsyte Chronicles* as a whole that ultimately detract from its quality as an extended meditation on the decline of the Victorian liberal upper middle class. Nevertheless, the narrative trajectories are more complex than this basic story line, the narrative voice and tone are complex, and the range of emotional, political, and cultural registers is quite significant. My focus here, though, is not so much on the formal dimensions of the novel, though they do come into play, but on the ways

¹⁸ Jean Radford, introduction to *The Progress of Romance*, ed. Jean Radford (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), 15.

¹⁹ I am grateful to Peter Denney, who notes that Mr. Solmes is the name of the wealthy, calculating, penny-pinching suitor in *Clarissa*. He is the exemplar of “economic man” in probably the greatest novel of sensibility in the eighteenth century. Like Soames, Solmes also viewed his fiancée (*Clarissa*) as property, and familial relations as exchange relations.

some of its thematic concerns open up questions concerning the relationship between liberalism and the emotions.

I want to begin with the quite deliberate use of the concept of exchange signified by “Forsythe ‘Change.” We are introduced to this at the very beginning of the novel, at June Forsythe’s and Philip Bosinney’s engagement, where each family member, we are told, “gave exactly what was right and proper, by a species of family adjustment arrived at as prices are arrived at on the stock exchange—the exact niceties being regulated at Timothy’s commodious red-brick residence in Bayswater.”²⁰ The nature of the Forsythe exchange is spelt out further at the next major gathering, a dinner hosted by Swithin, another of old Jolyon’s brothers:

As in all self-respecting families, an emporium had been established where family secrets were bartered, and family stock priced. It was known on Forsythe ‘Change that Irene regretted her marriage. Her regret was disapproved of. She ought to have known her own mind: no dependable woman made these mistakes. (41)

Calculating the potential credit or value from an exchange is core to how the Forsytes think; it is their very habitus. They are preoccupied, we could say, with safety through “foresight.” This extends to the emotions. It is not that the Forsytes lack emotions; they are full of them, and the novel actually explores a very wide range: rancor, jealousy, pride, anger, fear, to say nothing of bad faith and a host of others. As Bernard Bergonzi unkindly but not altogether unfairly put it forty years ago, “Galsworthy is a good deal better at social satire than at depicting scenes of passion—some of these are distinctly melodramatic,” and by the later sections of *The Forsythe Saga* “his work lost all emotional coherence,” revealing a “sludge of sentimentality.”²¹ *The Man of Property* is certainly much tighter than his later work, and what we see there is an account of Forsyitean emotions that are portrayed as forms of investment, with expectations about likely returns and profits. “The outward relations between James and his son were marked by a lack of sentiment peculiarly Forsyitean, but for all that the two were by no means unattached. Perhaps they regarded one another as an investment” (61), Galsworthy writes, the investment being to shore up the risk of inner loneliness. Even Soames’s fastidiousness is “an investment, cultivated by the owner for his advancement, in accordance with the laws of competition” (53).

Old Jolyon, too, engages in emotional investments of this kind, first with June, then in reaching out to his son again, and, following that, with his son’s children by his second marriage. However, there are significant differences between him and Soames—stressed throughout the novel—that enable the former to gain some return. In old Jolyon’s case, emotional investment carries with it an element of risk. The concept of risk is particularly important because it implies a reduction in control, a reduction in possession, including self-possession. Thomas Docherty, following Jean-François Lyotard, makes a useful point in this context:

Basically, the “just exchange” which supposedly lies at the root of a capitalist economic principle is an exchange whose real purpose is to control time by foreclosing it: the future (return of an investment) is controlled by the present act (making the investment), and, importantly, the present itself is predetermined by the future promise of the return. In this state of affairs, a

²⁰ John Galsworthy, *The Forsythe Saga* (London: Heinemann, 1922), 7. All subsequent references to *The Forsythe Saga* will be to this edition and given in parentheses in the text.

²¹ Bernard Bergonzi, *The Turn of a Century* (London: Macmillan, 1973), 135, 137.

temporal gap exists between the two moments of exchange; and the greater that temporal gap, the greater the risk that something will escape the structure or foreclosure.²²

Risk was crucial to the early growth of the market economy and to the rise of the Forsytes, a time before the setting of the novels. While a fundamental driver for the energy that was valued so highly by both nineteenth-century capitalists and the culture of Victorian capitalism generally, it takes on a slightly more ambivalent quality in *The Forsyte Saga*. Thus, Dartie, James's son-in-law and a bit of a bounder, gambles the last of his money at the races, a moment when "the true Stock Exchange instinct triumphed within him" (162). On balance though, risk is valorized by Galsworthy. For James and Soames in particular, it is now about engaging in a "safe" market, depending on Consols "at three percent."²³ Any margin of risk needs to be calculated to the finest degree in an attempt to control as much as possible of the future. Speaking of Soames's reaction to the increased cost of Robin Hill, the narrator ironically comments:

Nothing in this world is more sure to upset a Forsyte than the discovery that something on which he has stipulated to spend a certain sum has cost more. And this is reasonable, for upon the accuracy of his estimates the whole policy of his life is ordered. If he cannot rely on definite values of property, his compass is amiss; he is adrift upon bitter waters without a helm. (193)

Galsworthy's account of the decline of the Forsytes (the series begins with them at "the efflorescence of their powers," in 1886) is, like that of his New Liberal compeers, an attempt to trace out the problems of that earlier individualistic, self-interested liberalism. In particular, he sees the outward-directed energy that drove them to their efflorescence increasingly replaced by an inner-directed energy or will, concerned primarily with holding on to what they now possess. This is signified in many ways, including the Forsytes' refusal to let go of their grasp on life. What lies behind it is the social mobility that characterized the shift of lower-middle-class liberals into the upper middle class, a shift from fighting for the kinds of rights espoused by liberals in the early and middle parts of the century to fighting to defend one's gains. Strolling in Hyde Park with his second wife, Annette, on the morning of Queen Victoria's funeral procession in 1901, Soames, for example, ruminates on the changes during her reign and is "impressed" by "this summing up of a long rich period." However, the narrative voice soon shifts from him to the narrator, who continues:

God had become Mammon—Mammon so respectable as to deceive himself. Sixty-four years that favoured property, and had made the upper middle-class; buttressed, chiselled, polished it, till it was almost indistinguishable in manners, morals, speech, appearance, habit, and soul from the nobility. An epoch which had gilded individual liberty so that if a man had money, he was free in law and fact, and if he had not money, he was free in law and not in fact. (518–19)

Liberal principles might have been useful for a class on the rise, but they needed to be well curtailed for a class that had achieved ascendancy and was now on intimate terms with the nobility (a condition signified by the marriage of Fleur to the aristocrat Michael Mont at the end of book 3).

²² Thomas Docherty, "Big Texts: A Critique of Literary Economy," *Yearbook of English Studies* 26 (1996): 257.

²³ Consols (short for "consolidated") were government bonds, originally established in the mid-eighteenth century. From the early nineteenth century they had a set return of 3 percent. In 1888 a new bond was created at 2¾ percent under the National Debt (Conversion) Act, and the rate was reduced to 2½ percent in 1903. For James and Soames, sitting on "Consols at three percent" was a safe return in potentially unstable times.

Unlike the New Liberals, Galsworthy does not generate social alternatives to this earlier liberalism; but like them, he is concerned to articulate a more complicated liberalism that understands the emotions as crucial elements in an ideally collective, open, and generous worldview. One key to this is a notion of risk that, if not entirely uncalculated, is at least not nearly as calculated as that minimal risk exemplified by Soames. Such resistance to calculation also involves an emphasis on the emotional function of “Beauty” and “Freedom” in particular. The effect of beauty and the desire for freedom generate risks that are open-ended, potentially destructive but also potentially liberating. They act to disrupt the world of the earlier, possessive liberalism that, in the case of Soames, is increasingly congealed, both politically and emotionally, “an unbreakable cage,” as the narrator observes at one point. Galsworthy spells it out clearly enough in the Preface to *The Forsyte Saga*: “the figures of Insurance Societies and the utterances of Judges reassure us daily that our earthly paradise is still a rich preserve, where the wild raiders, Beauty and Passion, come stealing in, filching security from beneath our noses. As surely as a dog will bark at a brass band, so will the essential Soames in human nature ever rise up uneasily against the dissolution which hovers round the folds of ownership” (xiii).

Risk and the emotions disrupt the well-organized world of the Forsytes in several ways. At the very beginning of the novel, in the middle of the regulated place of exchange that marks the engagement of June and Bosinney, the latter appears as a potential danger, a “Buccaneer” as one of the Forsytes calls him. Buccaneers steal property, which is ultimately what Bosinney does. The Forsytes’ misgivings, their sense that he is a risk, an object of distrust (all words used in relation to him), exist not because he is poor—since others such as he had married into this upper-middle-class family—but because during an earlier visit to two of the aunts, his gray felt hat had been mistaken for a cat. This, the narrator tells us, “was their significant trifle, the detail in which was embedded the meaning of the whole matter” (6). It is the sheer superfluousness of the disruption to regulated exchange that is being registered here. Put differently, we could say that the “surplus meaning” of Bosinney’s hat escapes the rules by which the Forsytes regulate the exchange of gossip (though that surplus meaning is drawn out by the narrator). This is classical political economy turned inside out. Rather than being produced by labor, surplus value here inheres in the disruption to normalized patterns of exchange; but as in the real economy, it is still the “outsider,” the “nonpossessor,” who generates the surplus. The surplus meaning is a marker of fear and anxiety for the Forsytes now trading on “Forsyte ’Change,” the mirror reverse of the accumulation of economic surplus value derived at an earlier historical moment from investments in the real but “risky” market. Indeed, the market itself no longer represents risk. As James ruminates when the first hints of an affair between Irene and Bosinney start to circulate:

Amongst all those persons of his acquaintance, who went into the City day after day and did their business there, whatever it was, and in their leisure moments bought shares, and houses, and ate dinners, and played games, as he was told, it would have seemed to him ridiculous to suppose that there were any who would run risks for the sake of anything so recondit, so figurative, as passion. (116)

Soames’s emotional investment in Irene, on the other hand, lacks risk, covered as it always is by a mask of self-possession, usually characterized as sardonic. Consequently, not only does it fail to provide the surplus value that investments are supposed to realize, but it also fails entirely: “Out of his other property, out of all the things he had collected, his silver, his pictures, his houses, his

investments, he got a secret and intimate feeling: out of her he got none" (55). It is not that Soames does not care for or desire Irene; he certainly does. But the surplus emotional value he hoped to achieve from his investment fails to be produced. This is because he cannot understand her value in terms *other* than that of calculation, of estimation; and "upon the accuracy of [a Forsythe's] estimates the whole policy of his life is ordered" (193). Bosinney's continual going over budget on Robin Hill and his insistence that the aesthetic beauty of the house is more important than sticking to the estimate become the symbolic point of conflict between emotional investment as a means to an end (Soames thinks he will "gain credit" with Irene for building it) and emotions as ends in themselves.

One of the central tenets of the New Liberalism was the value attached to the inherent rather than instrumental quality of emotional life. "Common experience," L. T. Hobhouse comments, "tells us that there are those who would be better men . . . if they would only give their natural emotions free play."²⁴ But it is not just common experience that is being relied on here. "A margin of disorder, or hazard and unreason," Hobson argues, will always remain a factor in the interest of life,²⁵ a factor that, as Gal Gerson has suggested, "was introduced [by J. A. Hobson in the postwar years] as a good in itself, not as excessive income to be redirected for future production, nor as a symptom of social pathology."²⁶ This is very much Galsworthy's position. His critique of the Forsytes is a critique of *classic* Victorian liberalism. They fear the potential and then the actuality of disorder created by Bosinney and Irene. Those two engage, one could say, in behavior whose consequences are incalculable, unable to be estimated. In *The Forsyte Saga* Galsworthy is tracing out the decline of *that* form of liberalism, the liberalism of the market, the liberalism of individual self-interest. And he portrays self-interest and self-absorption as going very deep, even into the emotions themselves. This is spelt out clearly in the reaction of James following the death of his older sister Ann:

Of all the brothers and sisters James manifested the most emotion. Tears rolled down the parallel furrows of his thin face; where he should go now to tell his troubles he did not know; Juley was no good, Hester worse than useless! He felt Ann's death more than he had ever thought he should; this would upset him for weeks! (83)

This is the emotional equivalent of rational self-interest promulgated by the mid-Victorian liberalism that collapsed in 1886, absorbed on the one side by a new market-driven Toryism and rejected on the other by the emerging politics of the Labour Party. Old Jolyon, we are informed, "was too old to be a Liberal, had long ceased to believe in the political doctrines of his Club" (22–23); indeed, "the orthodoxy he had worn in the sixties, as he had worn side-whiskers out of sheer exuberance, had long dropped off, leaving him reverent before three things alone—beauty, upright conduct, and the sense of property; and the greatest of these now was beauty" (273). If old Jolyon slips from classic liberalism toward a more sentimental and "collective" view of life (and there are numerous examples of this shift in the course of *The Man of Property* and the first interlude), Soames moves more and more toward a conservatism that Margaret Thatcher would have found both familiar and congenial seventy years later.

²⁴ L. T. Hobhouse, *The Metaphysical Theory of the State* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1918), 35.

²⁵ J. A. Hobson, "The Ethics of Gambling," *International Journal of Ethics* 15, no. 2 (January 1905): 135–48, quoted in Gal Gerson, *Margins of Disorder: New Liberalism and the Crisis of European Consciousness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 91.

²⁶ Gerson, *Margins of Disorder*, 92.

The alternative developed by the New Liberals was a sense of flourishing and unfolding for which they used the shorthand term “life,” around which coalesced a set of terms, including “growth,” “enlargement,” “opportunity,” and “capacity,” and the fundamental connection between personal and social forms of flourishing. Thus, for Hobhouse in *Liberalism* (1911), “the foundation of liberty is the idea of growth,” and “there is no side of a man’s life which is unimportant to society, for whatever he is, does, or thinks may affect his own well-being, which is and ought to be a matter of common concern, and may also directly or indirectly affect the thought, action, and character of those with whom he comes in contact.”²⁷ The redemption of modernity could be achieved only through an evolutionary process toward greater co-operation, an “illimitable” process as Hobson called it in *The Crisis of Liberalism* (1909), “based on the infinitude of the possibilities of human life.”²⁸

Hobson, like other New Liberals of the time, was profoundly concerned with the *future* of liberalism.²⁹ New Liberals all had powerful emotional investments in that future. “We were all revolutionaries then,” Henry Nevinson recalled, “and dimly felt the change that was just at hand when the whole structure of society, idolised by the prophets of manufacturing Liberalism, was to be criticised, tested, and upheaved.”³⁰ Their belief in regeneration, though, was very different from the moralizing philanthropy that characterized an earlier generation. Philanthropy came in for sustained critique, particularly in its explanation of poverty as the result of individual weakness or immorality. For Hobson, among others, the need was for improved material conditions at work and at home, changes to the means and relations of economic production, the expansion of democracy, and an increased role to be taken up by the state. Although not all New Liberals had the same views on these matters, such strategies characterized what they saw as the machinery of reform, the means by which social improvement could be realized. However, as William Clarke pointed out, “in attempting social reform the great danger is to rely on mere machinery, to apply secular tests to spiritual things.”³¹ Galsworthy has the same danger in mind in his portrayal of Mrs. Baynes, whose “name was upon the committees of numberless charities connected with the Church,” and who organized things so admirably that “by the time the takings were handed over, they were indeed skim milk divested of all cream of human kindness. But as she often justly remarked, sentiment was to be deprecated. She was, in fact, a little academic” (184).

Discussing the importance of “positive” over “negative” freedom in a chapter of *The Crisis of Liberalism* significantly called “The Vision of Liberalism,” Hobson argues that “a more constructive and a more evolutionary idea of liberty is needed to give the requisite *élan de vie* to the movement; and every cause of liberation, individual, class, sex, and national, must be recharged with the fresh enthusiasm of this fuller faith. . . . Each generation of Liberals will be required to translate a new set of needs and aspirations into facts.”³² It is instructive that the title of the book in which this profession of faith is made is *The Crisis of Liberalism* because it is precisely a sense of

²⁷ L. T. Hobhouse, *Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 65.

²⁸ J. A. Hobson, *The Crisis of Liberalism* (Brighton: Harvester, 1974), 45.

²⁹ This, too, is a powerful theme in contemporary works: Google produces just under seven million results for this phrase. Perhaps the much smaller number of “future of liberalism” than “crisis of liberalism” references (see Macleod and Denney’s introduction to this collection) merely reflects the search engine’s algorithms, but it does give us pause for thought.

³⁰ Henry Nevinson, *Changes and Chances* (London: Nisbet, 1923), 57, 90.

³¹ William Clarke, “Christianity and Social Reform,” in Burrows and Hobson, *William Clarke*, 355.

³² Hobson, *Crisis of Liberalism*, 93.

crisis that triggers the specific emotional response of hope. We see something similar in Charles Masterman, who, in *The Condition of England* (1909), comments that “I am not pessimistic, but I am anxious, as I believe all the thinking men of today are anxious, when they realize the forces which are making for decay.”³³ Masterman’s anxiety is inextricably linked to his faith, his hope that at this time of transition, the forces for growth and enlargement will overcome those of what he calls Reaction.

For late Victorian New Liberals, many of whom came from Evangelical backgrounds, hope is a key component of the future-directed imaginary we see in these passages just quoted, and it runs like a leitmotif throughout much of their work. The emotion of hope that constituted such an important part of New Liberal reformism was something more than a vague feeling that all will turn out well. Martha Nussbaum offers us a way of understanding this. Her particular kind of neo-Stoicism is just one among several competing recent theories of the emotions, but I find it very persuasive in this context. For Nussbaum, “emotions are forms of evaluative judgment that ascribe to certain things and persons outside a person’s own control great importance for the person’s own flourishing. Emotions are thus, in effect, acknowledgments of neediness and lack of self-sufficiency.”³⁴ The situations within which New Liberals found themselves—and indeed the situations reformist liberals find themselves in today—felt precisely outside their control. It is thus not surprising to find hope and despair as the polar correlatives of anxiety among New Liberals. The fluctuations between them very much depended on complex changes, both personal and social, but if one were to generalize, it would not be unfair to claim that hope figures more in their writing than does despair. Galsworthy, too, might be seen in that light, though it does seem to me that his narratives in the later volumes of *The Forsyte Chronicles* come across as less and less hopeful.

These were not just abstract, intellectual ideas. They embodied a set of values about growth and co-operation and a belief in the principles of democracy as the means of regenerating English society by fostering an ethos of cooperative self-flourishing. As such, they drew in emotional responses (hope, faith, anxiety) that often varied from moment to moment and that in turn charged New Liberal writings with their characteristic metaphorical and tonal valencies. We see it, for example, in Hobhouse’s chapter on the future of liberalism:

Our reformers must learn to rely less on the advertising value of immediate success and more on the deeper but less striking changes of practice or of feeling, to think less of catching votes and more of convincing opinion. . . . The advice seems cold to the fiery spirits, but they may come to learn that the vision of justice in the wholeness of her beauty kindles a passion that may not flare up into moments of dramatic scintillation, but burns with the enduring glow of the central heat.³⁵

These were deeply engaged liberals, manifesting what Fred Inglis has called, in a slightly different context, “radical earnestness,”³⁶ typified by a commitment to righteousness. Clarke, for instance, regarded Stopford Brooke as “the true preacher of righteousness, not content to refer the outcast

³³ Charles Masterman, *The Condition of England* (London: Methuen, 1909), 4.

³⁴ Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of the Emotions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 22.

³⁵ Hobhouse, *Liberalism*, 127.

³⁶ Fred Inglis, *Radical Earnestness: English Social Theory, 1880–1980* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1982).

to golden streets and palm branches in another world, but, like St. Basil and St. Ambrose, pledged to justice here and now for the humblest member of the common family of man.³⁷ Righteousness was a way of being in the world, and in Clarke's view at least, it involved not just the spirit of goodness but also the spirit of beauty.³⁸

Despite his occasionally florid set piece, Galsworthy's "wild raiders, Beauty and Passion," are generally close in tone to Hobhouse's "enduring glow of the central heat" and Clarke's "spirit of goodness [and] spirit of beauty." All the Forsyte men whose characters are developed to any degree find Irene strangely and often "quietly" attractive. This sometimes manifests as a sense of danger but also as a sense of youthfulness and spring, a sense of resistance and frustration (Soames), and later a sense of reciprocal warmth (young Jolyon). While Galsworthy has sometimes been criticized for failing to do more with Irene than keeping her as an object of desire, this was precisely his point. She is quite deliberately not a developed character but one who "represents" beauty or, more precisely, the effect of beauty on other characters. As the *Saga* proceeds, those Forsytes, like Soames, who attempt to possess or own beauty, make it their property, find it constantly escapes the attempt; whereas those who accept beauty on its own terms come to some accommodation with it. And this includes "the spirit of goodness." Young Jolyon's relationship with Irene develops as much out of his feelings of protection and justice as it does out of physical desire, and even old Jolyon, in the last period of his life, feels the need to settle money on her in his will as a way of protecting her from poverty.

The function of beauty, of freedom, of the emotions generally, and of the importance of risk that Galsworthy's brand of liberalism shares with that of the New Liberals is underpinned, as I noted earlier, by a belief in an open-ended, "unfolding" sense of life. In the case of the New Liberals, this belief is developed conceptually and theoretically and spelt out in numerous works. For Galsworthy, it takes the form not of a conceptual argument but of a kind of narrative equivalent to that conceptual argument. Through his "disruptions" into the world of the Forsytes, he generates not closure but openness in the various narrative trajectories that are played out in the *Saga*. As I have noted above, the disruption to the forthcoming marriage that begins the first novel creates consequences that can only be guessed at as we read further into the trilogy. Narrative expectations are frequently undermined, and the meaning of specific events or actions is often made uncertain because of the irony that runs throughout the whole *Saga*. Geoffrey Harvey captures this nicely in his account of the ending of *The Man of Property*. Speaking of "Galsworthy's resistance to the constraint imposed by the movement of traditional plots towards closure," he comments: "We discover that the novel's conclusion, to which our reading has been directed, in fact points towards further narrative development. The strong sense of closure produced by Soames's melodramatic snarl to the solicitous young Jolyon, 'we are not at home' (p. 376), as he slams the door in his face, which completes the satiric circle that began at the opening of the novel with old Jolyon's 'at home,' is qualified by the fact that it is in truth inconclusive."³⁹

Harvey's primary concern is with the effect on our reading experience, as he goes on to argue that "Galsworthy employs the contrary rhetorics of sympathy and irony, requiring our simultaneous closeness and detachment."⁴⁰ But the text also works through this double movement the-

37 William Clarke, "Stopford A. Brook," in Burrows and Hobson, *William Clarke*, 251.

38 See his "John Ruskin," in Burrows and Hobson, *William Clarke*, 402.

39 Geoffrey Harvey, "Reading *The Forsyte Saga*," *Yearbook of English Studies* 26 (1996): 128.

40 *Ibid.*

matically. The funeral of Aunt Ann, for example, elicits both the sympathetic closeness and ironic detachment that Harvey alludes to but develops them through the metaphor of organic unity:

Upon arriving, the coffin was borne into the chapel, and, two by two, the mourners filed in behind it. This guard of men, all attached to the dead body by kinship, was an impressive and singular sight in the great city of London, with its overwhelming diversity of life, its innumerable vocations, pleasures, duties, its terrible hardness, its terrible call to individualism.

The family had gathered to triumph over all this, to give a show of tenacious unity, to illustrate gloriously that law of property underlying the growth of their tree, by which it had thrived and spread, trunk and branches, the sap flowing through all, the full growth reached at the appointed time. The spirit of the old woman lying in her last sleep had called them to this demonstration. It was her final appeal to that unity which had been their strength—it was her final triumph that she had died while the tree was yet whole. (86–87)

Whatever sympathy we might have with the tenacity of the dying woman is undermined by the remark that it is the “law of property” which had nourished the tree, a law essentially self-interested, rational, and conflictual rather than organic. The tonal shift from sympathy to irony is replicated by the thematic shift from the Forsytes as an organic unity to their gathering as “a last proud pageant before they fell” (87), the occasion ending symbolically, when “the wind, like some slow, disintegrating force, blowing up the hill over the graves, struck them with its chilly breath; they began to split into groups” (88). References to the breaking up of the family and the splintering of the tree recur frequently through all three books of the *Saga*, Galsworthy making it clear that the principles that underpin the Forsytes are the principles that underpin market society. The family is, in Harvey’s words, “more of a cartel than a clan,”⁴¹ and its breakup is Galsworthy’s version of an ideological critique of market society. His frequent valorizing of compassion and altruistic behaviors exhibited by Jolyon’s side of the family in particular resonates not only with earlier Victorian fiction but also with the more collectivist liberalism of the New Liberals. If there is to be a future for liberalism, Galsworthy implies—and the New Liberals explicitly assert—it needs to be built around co-operation and collectivism as means by which individuals and groups can flourish. Breaking up classic Mancunian liberalism is essential to this.

Yet the breakup of the Forsyte family is not entirely without its problems. By 1920, for example, Soames’s “shrewd and matter-of-course probity in all money concerns had made him something of an autocrat in connection with these [Forsyte family] trusts. If Soames thought this or thought that, one had better save oneself the bother of thinking too. He guaranteed, as it were, irresponsibility to numerous Forsytes of the third and fourth generations” (678). Soames himself “sometimes felt as if the family bolt was shot, their possessive instinct dying out. They seemed unable to make money—this fourth generation; they were going into art, literature, farming, or the army; or just living on what was left them—they had no push and no tenacity. They would die out if they didn’t take care” (781). Admittedly, this is Soames’s view, but Galsworthy spends much of the third and final book of the *Saga*, aptly named *To Let*—where the solidity of ownership has shifted to the insecurity of “letting”—examining the “modern looseness” (717) of the new generation. He criticizes the rigidity and congealed life characterizing Soames’s rational self-interest but also warns not to go too far, as it were. Dissolution is essential, but as Lawrence—following

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 131.

Nietzsche—spelt out in *Women in Love* (1920), it can lead to nullity just as easily as it can lead to new life. This double movement of dissolution is implied throughout much of *To Let*. As a by-now old young Jolyon says to his son Jon in 1920, halfway through the novel:

“The young are tired of us, our gods and our ideals. Off with their heads, they say—smash their idols! And let’s get back to—nothing! And, by Jove, they’ve done it! Jon’s a poet. He’ll be going in, too, and stamping on what’s left of us. Property, beauty, sentiment—all smoke. We mustn’t own anything nowadays, not even our feelings. They stand in the way of—Nothing!”

“Nothing’s the god of today,” continued Jolyon, “we’re back where the Russians were sixty years ago, when they started Nihilism.” (672)

Young Jolyon’s outburst against what he sees as the nihilism of the young is in part an emotional reaction to the situation. Fleur, Soames’s daughter, and Jon, the son of young Jolyon and Irene, have fallen in love and wish to go ahead with their relationship despite opposition from their parents; from their perspective, the past is a dead hand, and Jon makes this clear in his response to Jolyon: “No, Dad,” cried Jon suddenly, “we only want to *live*, and we don’t know how, because of the Past—that’s all!” (673, emphasis in original).

Galsworthy’s liberalism is apparent in all this. Let’s break down the congealed world of mid-Victorian market liberalism, he is effectively saying, but let’s also make sure we don’t go too far and end up in a constant state of flux and nothingness. This is the problem of liberalism right from the beginning, but recast in the early twentieth-century context. As Edmund Fawcett argues:

[L]iberalism began with a predicament. The first liberals were looking for a new order after the productive turmoil of early industrial capitalism and three late eighteenth-century political revolutions—American, Dutch, and French—had turned society and politics upside down. Their principal challenge was that order would from now on be dynamic, not static. . . . In searching for an acceptable political order in a destabilized world of ceaseless change, liberals had accordingly a dream, a nightmare, and a daytime picture of human society that combined both in an unsteady, creative tension.⁴²

Galsworthy’s concern in *The Forsyte Saga* is less with finding a specifically political order (though there is plenty of political discussion in it) than with finding a kind of family order⁴³ that enables emotional and physical flourishing. The “mastery” of old Jolyon’s generation, a mastery that Soames attempts to retain in a changed world where, for example, women are recognized to have rights,⁴⁴ can no longer work in the early twentieth century. Mastery has to be learned and earned, and even then it can only be self-mastery.

In the remaining two trilogies of *The Forsyte Chronicles*, Galsworthy does not really go on to explore whether such a masterless and dynamic order can be achieved. But the key point is that for progressive liberals generally, and New Liberals in particular, it never can be achieved in a final state. “Social progress,” as the *Nation* reviewer of Hobhouse’s *Social Evolution and Political*

⁴² Edmund Fawcett, *Liberalism: The Life of an Idea* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 4.

⁴³ It should be noted, however, that family and political orders, while not strictly homologous in *The Forsyte Saga*, are quite deliberately related; Galsworthy on numerous occasions, for example, identifies the Forsytes with “England.”

⁴⁴ For Soames, “all this modern looseness had come out of her revolt; it seemed to him, fantastically, that she had started it, till all decent ownership of anything had gone, or was on the point of going” (717).

Theory (1911) argues, “requires the conception of some end to be progressively achieved; that end is the production of a growing social harmony. . . . The growing harmony is recognised by the common sense of mankind as intrinsically valuable, and it is this recognition that warrants us in finding progress in the course of what otherwise is only evolution.”⁴⁵ For New Liberals, this end is an intrinsic value, a way of being in the world and a way of the world being. The means by which such an end may be achieved vary between historical moments and between works. A review of Hobson’s *The Crisis of Liberalism* (1909) makes the point explicitly: “it is true that the progressive idea of one age is often a worn-out and perhaps an obstructive formula in the next.” Hence, the reviewer goes on to suggest, “the greater the need for an apostolic succession of thinking men who will constantly re-state political principles in terms of the living needs of each generation.”⁴⁶ In our time, the idea of “an apostolic succession of thinking men” is deeply problematical. However, the idea of constantly restating (or re-imagining) political principles “in terms of the living needs of each generation” does resonate. In our current polities, dominated as they are by forms of market-based neoliberalism, determining what those needs consist of, and in particular how they include emotional needs across the spectrum of populations, is a continuing task worthy of the attention of contemporary liberals. A

⁴⁵ *Nation*, 25 May 1912, 296.

⁴⁶ *Nation*, 8 January 1910, 614.