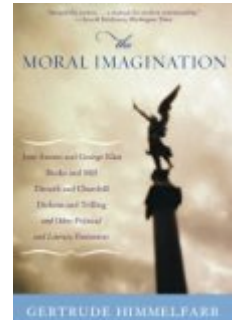


**Gertrude Himmelfarb.** *The Moral Imagination: From Edmund Burke to Lionel Trilling*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 2006. xv + 259 pp. \$16.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-56663-722-0.



**Reviewed by** Stewart Weaver

**Published on** H-Albion (July, 2007)

In this latest of her several collections of occasional essays, Gertrude Himmelfarb offers subtle appreciations of some notable thinkers and writers who besides being "eminently praiseworthy" in themselves have, she says, enriched her life and been especially important to her own political and philosophical development (p. ix). Though with one exception all of the essays have appeared in print before—some of them more than once, oddly—together they have original interest both for their close juxtaposition and for what they reveal about the evolving interests and attitudes of a prominent American Victorianist. The oldest essay, an "untimely appreciation" of the popular novelist John Buchan, dates to 1960; the most recent, a centenary tribute to Lionel Trilling, dates to 2005. The rest range in origin widely across the intervening forty-five years and they encompass a wide variety of subjects. Not surprisingly, given what we know of Himmelfarb's own post-Trotskyite disposition, many of her characters (Edmund Burke, Benjamin Disraeli, Michael Oakeshott, Winston Churchill) are recognizably conservative. But conservatism is a loose category, especially in the British context, and Himmelfarb

is not unduly bound by it. The book includes essays on George Eliot, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, and Walter Bagehot (the nominally Liberal author of *The English Constitution*, 1867). And the one original contribution, the one essay that has not appeared before, is a backhanded tribute to John Stuart Mill, not, to be sure, the classically liberal Mill of *On Liberty* (1859) but the "other Mill," as Himmelfarb calls him, the fretful moralist who found in Samuel Taylor Coleridge a saving antidote to his father James's rationalistic and utilitarian frame of mind.

Moralism is in fact the loosely organizing concept of this book, or rather "the moral imagination," as the title has it. The phrase derives from Burke, from the famous passage in the *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) in which Burke laments the passing of the age of chivalry and asserts the authority of the moral imagination against the "new conquering empire of light and reason." But it was Lionel Trilling, Himmelfarb says, who "popularized [the] expression for our time" (p. ix), and it has long been a staple of her own rhetorical repertoire. Thirty years ago, when

sociological theory and cliometrics were still in vogue, she called for "a restoration of moral imagination in the writing of social history." [1] She titled her 1991 study of nineteenth-century social thought *Poverty and Compassion: The Moral Imagination of the Late Victorians* and took her opening epigraph from Trilling. The essay on Trilling included here is titled "The Moral Imagination," and the same phrase recurs throughout the volume as a kind of signature note.

What does it mean? For Burke, the wardrobe of the moral imagination furnished all the "decent drapery of life," all the "superadded ideas ... which the heart owns, and the understanding ratifies, as necessary to cover the defects of our naked shivering nature." [2] For Trilling it stood in cautionary opposition to the most generous but intrusive impulses of the liberal imagination. "Some paradox of our natures leads us, when once we have made our fellow men the objects of our enlightened interest, to go on to make them the objects of our pity, then of our wisdom, ultimately of our coercion. It is to prevent this corruption," Trilling said, "the most ironic and tragic that man knows, that we stand in need of the moral realism which is the product of the free play of the moral imagination." [3] The inspiration that a social conservative might draw from this is obvious, and Himmelfarb has written at length elsewhere about (what is to her mind) the regrettable de-moralization of modern society and the relativist regression from "virtues" to "values." [4] Here, however, her purpose is simply to gather under the heading of the moral imagination an otherwise disparate and eclectic set of essays.

Inspired by an unexpected student comment in class, the opening essay on Burke presents the great critic of the Enlightenment as an unlikely apologist for Judaism. Lightly linked essays on George Eliot and Jane Austen follow and offer historical readings of *Middlemarch* (1871) and *Emma* (1816), the one "a tale of moral fulfillment," the other "a tale of moral education" (p. 25). The essay

on Dickens is a straight lift of a chapter from Himmelfarb's earlier book on *The Idea of Poverty* (1984) as is the essay on Disraeli (which like the Oakeshott essay also appears in an earlier anthology, *Marriage and Morals among the Victorians*, 1986). The essay on Mill, though new, is a composite of earlier writings and naturally draws attention to the conservative and theistic counterpoint in the great liberal's work. The most provocative essay in the book is the "untimely appreciation" of John Buchan, aka Lord Tweedsmuir of Elsfield, the popular novelist-turned-member of Parliament and governor general of Canada who, at his death in 1940, was "one of the last articulate representatives of the old England" (p. 135). Long since written off by the critical establishment as a fatuous philistine and unenlightened upholder of "the housemaster's credo of King and Country" (p. 152), Buchan, interestingly, was a Scottish Calvinist who came of age far removed from the upper-class English world he later romanticized. "A Tory by choice and principle rather than economic or class interests," he thought the existing class structure "inevitable and desirable," Himmelfarb explains. But he had no liking for the genuine reactionaries of his own party who, as he said, "woke to life only in the budget season" (pp. 147-148). Like the young Disraeli before him, Buchan was a Tory Radical who imagined a working alliance of the peers and the people against the corrupting influence of middle class oligarchy. He was, Himmelfarb allows, the very antithesis of the modern liberal, but whether in religious, political, or social terms, his views were "more nuanced than might be supposed" (p. 150), she insists, and thus worth more than snide academic dismissal.

Fair enough, but no amount of nuance, one might answer, will ever fully rehabilitate someone who accepted as thoughtlessly as Buchan did the inequities of class or the inevitability of the White Man's Burden. Too often in these essays, Himmelfarb evades the work of serious evaluation with an exculpatory appeal to "divided na-

tures" or "subtleties, complications, and ambiguities." Moreover, several of the essays now have a distinctly dated feel. "The current intellectual fashions put a premium on simplicity and activism," she says in the essay on Bagehot." The subtleties, complications, and ambiguities that until recently have been the mark of serious thought are now taken to signify a failure of nerve, a compromise with evil, an evasion of judgment and 'commitment'" (p. 121). However much sense this may have made when she wrote it in 1965, it certainly makes none now and one wonders that Himmelfarb's editors let it stand. Current intellectual fashions put such a premium on subtlety as to be downright impenetrable, while such politically committed work as Himmelfarb's, by contrast, seems simple, accessible, and clear. Occasionally, as in the essay on Winston Churchill, she is too close to the books under review to say much of original interest about her ostensible subject. More often, as in the sprightly essay on the "God-haunted" Knox family--an essay evidently inspired by the death of Penelope Fitzgerald, Edmund Knox's daughter, in 2000--she allows her own moral imagination to play freely across the page and create a strongly independent effect. In sum, *The Moral Imagination* is a compelling but somewhat complacent set of appreciations from a notable historian and social commentator.

#### Notes

[1]. Gertrude Himmelfarb, "Social History and the Moral Imagination," in *Art, Politics, and Will: Essays in Honor of Lionel Trilling*, ed. Quentin Anderson, Stephen Donadio, and Steven Marcus (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 54.

[2]. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 77.

[3]. Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), 221-222.

[4]. Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The De-Moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995).

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**Citation:** Stewart Weaver. Review of Himmelfarb, Gertrude. *The Moral Imagination: From Edmund Burke to Lionel Trilling*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. July, 2007.

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