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M. H. Abrams

AN INTERVIEW WITH M. H. ABRAMS

Peter A. Schock

M. H. (MEYER HOWARD) ABRAMS has taught English at Cornell University since 1945. An authority on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature, literary criticism and European Romanticism, Professor Abrams is the author of *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (1953), which received the Phi Beta Kappa Christian Gauss Prize in 1954. A second book, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (1971), won the James Russell Lowell Prize in 1972. Professor Abrams has edited a number of major books, most notably *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, of which he is both general and Romantic period editor. He is the author of many outstanding scholarly essays, among them "The Correspondent Breeze: A Romantic Metaphor" (1957), "English Romanticism: The Spirit of the Age" (1962), "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric" (1965), "What's the Use of Theorizing about the Arts?" (1972), "The Deconstructive Angel" (1977), "How to Do Things With Texts" (1979), and most recently, "Kant and the Theology of Art" (1981).

This interview was conducted in November, 1982, when Professor Abrams came to the University of Iowa to deliver the Ida Beam Lectures in English. The titles of his lectures were "Art as Such: The Origins of the Modern Theory of Literature and the Arts" and "How to Prove an Interpretation." Introducing Professor Abrams, Professor John E. Grant remarked on the monumental quality of Abrams's scholarly essays, in which "an extraordinary range of reading is brought to bear within a brief compass to illuminate an image or idea that crystallizes an entire mode of thought." The scope, lucidity, and wit that characterize Professor Abrams's writing are no less apparent in his responses to my questions.

SCHOCK: The model of the four coordinates of art criticism and their four corresponding kinds of theoretical perspectives you mapped out in the first chapter of *The Mirror and the Lamp* has become a considerable heuristic device. Hazard Adams draws on it in *Critical Theory Since Plato*, and it's also used in writing pedagogy to classify theories about composition. How did you hit on this scheme? Does it derive from anything prior, or is it original with you?

ABRAMS: It came about by a series of accidents and circumstances. It is true that the thing is widely used, and I sometimes walk into a classroom in a university where I'm visiting and there it is on the board, more or less inaccurately. I don't know what they do with it. I noticed that Lionel Trilling, with all due acknowledgment, uses it in the introduction to his anthology of literary criticism, which is very flattering. I started working on the critical theory of the early nineteenth century and quickly got the notion that the basic shift had been from theories of poetry that talked of that and the other arts primarily in terms of imitation, to theories which were what I call "expressive" in that they talk about poetry as the overflow of feeling, the expression of feeling, the inward made outward in a variety of fashions. I tried to write what was then my doctoral thesis in terms of that basic shift. A number of people who read *The Mirror and the Lamp* still think that's all I deal with, but it quickly turned out not to apply very well.

For a while I didn't see why, until I noticed, with the help, I think, of some of the writers in the so-called Chicago school of criticism, that the eighteenth-century theorists, though they talked about poetry as imitation, were rather writing in terms of poetry's effects on the auditor, according to the Horatian model in his *Art of Poetry* and in the manner of the rhetoricians. And when I thought about it in those terms it became clear that while eighteenth-century critics talked very often about poetry as imitation, the qualifying clause, almost universal, was that it was an imitation for the purpose of teaching, pleasing, and/or moving the reader. In other words, these views, to put it crudely, came down to taking the materials of poetry (and of the other arts too when, in the eighteenth century, they began to talk about the arts in general—"the fine arts") from experience in the outer world, human life in that world, and the objects in that world, but to so alter and order them artistically as to achieve certain prerequisite effects on the reader. Well, that immediately gave me a third coordinate to deal with: there was the poet who expressed poetry; there was the outer world which was imitated; and there was the audience for whom you wrote in an effort to move or affect them in certain ways.

Once I'd done that, it became clear that a good deal of modern theory—what was then modern theory—of the late forties, early fifties, didn't fit any of those rubrics, and I developed the fourth kind of theory, which I then called the objective theory, that tries to deal with the poem in isolation from its originating source in the poet or in the world it represents, and to treat it instead as self-bounded and self-sufficient, in terms—theoretically at least—of its purely internal relationships. So that gave me the complete system, in terms of which I tried to analyze and classify theories in a preliminary way in that book. That doesn't mean that's the only way to do it. It is, as you put it well, heuristic; it's a convenient way to do it for my purposes, which were to isolate what was distinctive about Romantic theory, which seemed to me to be the orientation, either sole or primary, to the poet himself in

establishing the nature of poetry and developing criteria of the poetic kinds and of value in poetry.

As to whether it's original with me, who knows? This and that part of it I picked up from various other writers, such as R.S. Crane and the other Chicago critics.

SCHOCK: —who are called 'neo-Aristotelians,' and it occurred to me that your system resembles Aristotle's four causes: the efficient, final, material and formal.

ABRAMS: In a way, but it doesn't exactly jibe with the four causes. There are indeed four coordinates in terms of which I lay out theories for comparison. The trouble is, as I've said before, that since the title specifies only the mirror and the lamp, people presume I am concerned with two kinds of theories and that's all. Well, there are four kinds.

SCHOCK: René Wellek's claim in "The Concept of Romanticism in Literary Theory" that there is a single attitude toward Nature shared by the Romantic poets creates problems for anyone who wants to see where William Blake fits in along the spectrum of Romanticism. I'd like to know how you place him among the English Romantic figures—how close to the center as you conceive of it.

ABRAMS: Well, that's a tough question. When it comes to William Blake, anybody who deals with him with high assurance is riding for a fall. It depends where you look at Blake, how you choose to read him; I once gave a lecture called "The Radical Ambiguity of William Blake," on precisely this kind of issue. I'll tell you the way I tend to see it. Everybody knows that when Blake read some of Wordsworth's statements about the mind in relation to Nature, he said it gave him a bellyache from which he almost died, which was his graphic way of declaring that what Wordsworth said didn't exactly please him. On the other hand, I think Blake doesn't get angry at someone who is so widely off the mark that he just seems to miss it completely. I think when he gets angry it's at people who come pretty close to what he's doing, but miss it far enough to falsify what Blake thinks is the truth of the case. Blake deals with Nature in a variety of passages. Sometimes he's very derogatory: he says, "as for Nature, I don't care about that, it's as the dirt upon my feet." Well, you always have to take Blake in context, you always have to remember what the situation is, to whom he's talking, how angry he is, and the degree to which he's deliberately trying to be outrageous in order to fluster and confuse Crabb Robinson and others.

That aside, I think one of the most revealing ways Blake manages what one could call his metaphysic or his world-view is in terms of fixed vision as against flexible vision, single vision as against what he calls multiple vision, up to a fourfold way of seeing. It is single vision that yields you Nature in the sense of a physical world as such. And it isn't that Blake denies

that there is single vision or that he claims that single vision is, in a profound sense, illusory: what single vision does is to perceive the thing inadequately or in a way that doesn't reveal all of its aspects. You rise from that through flexibility of seeing until you get to the highest mode of seeing, in which you apprehend everything as part of you and you as part of mankind. All then coheres into one, which Blake represents graphically in his basic myth of the one man, Albion, who falls apart into mankind in general, the separate sexes, the separate faculties, and the natural world.

Now Blake's single vision, if I'm crudely right about this, is coincident with what Wordsworth and Coleridge denounced as the "tyranny of the eye," that is, as seeing only with the physical eye, which both of them thought is enormously inadequate, and on which Coleridge blamed all the mistakes of the empiricist philosophy and the school of Locke, Newton's mistakes when he tried to metaphysicize his scientific discoveries and so on. Single vision gives us the world that we see with our senses and nothing more. And Wordsworth and Coleridge also insisted that poetry doesn't deal with that kind of reality; it has to deal with the world already altered, transformed and humanized by imagination, which comes fairly close to what Blake is saying. That is, the world of sense (or Blake's single vision) has been transformed imaginatively and by the action of the human passions so as to yield us a world fit to live in; and this is the world the poets deal with. The other Romantic poets don't go as far as Blake, but I think what is common to many of them is the admission of validity, in some sense, of the physical world, and of the fact that we're capable of seeing the world that way, but also the claim that this is an inadequate way of seeing, and for Blake, it's a vicious way of seeing. The need is to transform it by something more, and when Coleridge talks about poetry being the "whole soul of man in motion," he means in motion even in the act of perceiving the outer world, and this corresponds with at least some of the stages of Blake's movement up through the hierarchies of seeing to the ultimate vision, that all things are one, that we're all part of each other and of the universe in which we find ourselves.

I think, on the other hand, the attempt to make all of these people fall into total coincidence because they happen to live in the same period, and because we attach to them the term 'Romantic,' is a bad mistake. Yet I also think that to take Blake at his own word, about his total discrepancy from Wordsworth on these matters is also to be a little literal-minded.

SCHOCK: On the basis of your views in "The Deconstructive Angel," do you think Deconstructionism has a future?

ABRAMS: Yes, it's going to have a future. Derrida's so-called deconstructive way of dealing with texts, or "writing," is a mode of linguistic philosophy which tries to reveal the degree to which not only all views of language hitherto, but also the use of language itself, incorporate a metaphysical premise he calls the existence of "presence." He assumes that, in order to

be determinately meaningful, language requires an absolute ground in presence, but also that such a ground does not exist. As a consequence of this lack, he claims, language dissipates into “indeterminacy” and “undecidability.”

What has happened in America is that the American critics have taken what is primarily a metaphysical, or philosophical view, and converted it into a method of practical criticism, by continuing the strong strain in America of the New Critical approach to the explication of literary works, one by one. The New Criticism is widely derogated now, but we continue to deal with literature in terms of close reading and the close explication of single texts. And what they’ve done—people like de Man and Hillis Miller and others—is to apply the principle of deconstructive metaphysics to a New Critical attention to the text of a poem as such, by demonstrating the way that the text of any poem whatever, if you read it according to their premises, proceeds to deconstruct itself by “disseminating,” to use one of Derrida’s terms, its apparently stable meanings into an indefinite range of meanings which inescapably involve self-contradiction.

Now the shortcoming of that, as a method of criticism, is revealed by its fruits, and that is, it’s terribly boring: you find that all poems ultimately say one thing and one thing only, and that is, that they can’t say anything decisively or determinately. After you’ve read deconstructive criticism applied to some poems, novels, or other works of literature, you quickly begin to anticipate that that’s what you’re going to find the next time a deconstructive critic turns his attention to another work. The only remaining interest lies in the discovery of “how’s he going to do it this time”? “Where’s he going to start this time”? “Where’s he going to find what Hillis Miller calls the ‘loose thread,’ which he pulls on, and so unravels the whole thing”? So I don’t see how deconstructive criticism can possibly survive in that radical form, if only because it’s so utterly monotonous—to find all poems saying the same thing, which is, in effect, that they can say nothing, or nothing determinate.

But of course Deconstruction has a future. It’s going to leave a mark on criticism. The kind of readings deconstructive critics do—especially the analysis of the rhetorical and figurative play in a text—is bound to affect the way others of us read and talk about texts, even though we stop short of the ultimate dissemination of the text. I think the same thing will happen to Deconstruction that has happened to earlier new movements in criticism, after a brief heyday in which each movement achieves a vogue as a radical alternative to traditional criticism. But traditional criticism remorselessly moves on, assimilates some of the new insights, and continues without radical shift in its mode or momentum. Some of the discoveries and procedures of Deconstruction will become assimilated into the traditional mode of reading—that is, reading on the assumption that an author undertook to say something determinate, and that our inherited practice of the language

is close enough to that of the author to yield us adequate assurance that the core of meanings that we interpret approximate what the author undertook to say by the sentences in his text.

SCHOCK: Who were your teachers in Romantic studies and in criticism, and how did you get started studying criticism and literary theory?

ABRAMS: Well, I really did very little formal work at college in the Romantic period. I remember as an undergraduate taking a course in English Romantic Poetry from John Livingstone Lowes, who unfortunately was past his prime at the time, but still an eloquent and persuasive lecturer. But his line wasn't particularly the one I took in my graduate period, though my undergraduate essay that was published as *The Milk of Paradise* obviously did get quite a lot from Lowes; I think I mentioned him a couple of times in the course of it. That book later became notorious, if not famous, despite itself. It was published in about three hundred fifty copies, and disappeared from sight until the drug culture of the 1960s and 70s suddenly made people think of it as an avant-garde book, and it was reprinted by three separate publishers—two paperback publishers and one hardcover publisher, I believe—in a single year. I turned out to have been riding the wave of the future! I only let them reprint it, however, with the proviso that they allow me to write a new preface for it, in which I disowned sympathy with the current drug culture, and pointed out that whatever truth there might have been in my notion that some major poets and prose writers got materials from their opium reveries, they all insisted on the horrible cost of this kind of addiction. Nobody insisted more strongly than Coleridge and DeQuincey on the cost of becoming a drug addict, in the loss of moral capacity, the destruction of character, and the destruction, eventually, even of the imaginative power.

As a graduate student at Harvard I took a seminar with Theodore Spencer, who died, unfortunately, young, and who was himself a poet, wrote a good book on Shakespeare, and was very much interested in modern poetry. He happened to teach a seminar that I took, I think my first year in graduate school, on English literature in the decade of the 1830s. At that time a couple of books had come out which dealt with a single decade of English Literature in the nineteenth century. That interested him, and he organized his seminar in that way. Well, the fact was, in the 1830s, nothing much was happening in literature. It was the end either of the lives, or of the productive periods, of the great English Romantic poets. Coleridge survived for a while, and Wordsworth lived through and beyond that period, but stopped doing anything of great account in poetry, and the others were dead. Tennyson had just begun to publish; Arnold hadn't been published, as I recall. In lieu of major poets, we started to work with people like Thomas Campbell, Samuel Rogers, and other poets of that quality—including Robert Montgomery, who wrote awful epics; one of them was called *Satan*. "Satan Montgomery" he was himself named after his success at that time.

So perforce I turned my attention to criticism; I wrote my report—an inordinately long seminar paper—on the critical theory of that time. I think that led to my picking it up as the topic for my Ph.D. thesis, also under the sponsorship of Theodore Spencer, though I don't believe he read more than two or three chapters of the work. It was very laissez-faire, catch-as-catch-can in some mentor-student relationships in the graduate schools of those days, at least at Harvard. Some teachers kept a tight grip on their students' work; others let them have their heads. Ted let me have my head, so I did pretty much what I wanted.

Well, I wrote lots of chapters and then threw them away, I read more and more and thought more and more, and finally wrote a very long thesis, inordinately long—I'd never accept anything of that length from one of my students—which dealt with the Romantic theory of poetry and the theory of criticism too. The theory of poetry I at that time tried to deal with in terms of expression versus imitation solely; later, as I've already said, I greatly complicated that scheme. But the theory of criticism itself which dealt with questions such as "is there a standard of taste?" I dropped out of the book; and eventually, after thirteen years of hard but not irremissive work, I finished *The Mirror and the Lamp*. The book has the same title as the original thesis. An amusing thing is that one of my graduate students was travelling in England, and gleefully found and mailed to me, as a present, a very bad novel, published, I believe, in the 1910s, called *The Mirror and the Lamp*. So even the title, unbeknownst to me, is not an original title. I suppose that some readers of the two works might say what some commentators said about the two James brothers—that William wrote the fiction and Henry the psychology; in my case, that I wrote the fiction and the other fellow the criticism!

SCHOCK: As is evident from the essays contributed to *High Romantic Argument*, the reflection of others upon your work inevitably turns to your characteristic inquiry into "radical constitutive metaphors." In the essay "The Correspondent Breeze: A Romantic Metaphor," you distinguish your mode of inquiry from that of a Jungian critic's interest in fundamental metaphors. I'd like to know more about the source of your interest in constitutive metaphors, and how this came to occupy such a prominent place in your methodology.

ABRAMS: Through influence, but without anxiety. You pick up something that somebody else has done, you find it illuminating, and without making any deliberate decision about it, you continue to work with it because you continue to find it revealing. What happened was that I was in England for a year right after getting my A.B., on a fellowship to Cambridge University, and went there to work with I.A. Richards—that was the year before he finally came to America. He was then interested in Locke and Coleridge, and was engaged in finishing the book that came out very soon thereafter, called

Coleridge on Imagination. So he got me reading Locke and Coleridge; then I became interested in following Richards's own work, and that of C.K. Ogden, his collaborator on the book called *The Meaning of Meaning*. Whether through Richards' suggestion or not—I don't remember precisely—I read a book by C.K. Ogden called *Bentham's Theory of Fictions*.

What Ogden had pulled out of Bentham was his analysis of the role that fictions play in legal and moral terminology, and to Bentham this was a purely deceptive role. Bentham was still in the tradition of Locke, which distrusts metaphors, and looks for literal language as the only way to approximate the truth. But quite apart from that, his basic procedure was to show in the terminology that is central to law and morals, that the Latin roots are radically metaphorical. The word 'obligation,' for example, goes back to a root meaning "tied to," and there are lots of examples like that. Nowadays this doesn't seem any great discovery; of course the Deconstructionists make much of the fact that there is no literal language—all language turns out to be metaphorical. But in Bentham's day it was thought that there was literal language as well as metaphorical language. But a lot of the metaphors are dead, and so dead that you have to know the Latin in order to unravel the literal root-meanings that have been transferred to the metaphorical moral or legislative sense.

I kept thinking about things in terms of metaphors, and then finally began working on the critical theory of the early nineteenth century. It didn't require much discernment to recognize that the mirror played a constant, reiterative, and explicit role in much imitation theory. Literature is a mirror held up to life; Shakespeare, says Johnson for example, holds the mirror up to life in his dramas. And as for expressive theory—the word *expression* itself means "to press out," and so turns to the poet as the source for the materials of his work rather than to the world which is said to be mirrored, reflected, represented, and so on. I saw that both of those theories involved metaphors or metaphoric analogues, such as mirrors and lamps, and it began to be clear that metaphors played a key role in other kinds of theories, some of them in a way that isn't revealed specifically by my coordinates. Take, for example, organic theory, which I deal with at some length in *The Mirror and the Lamp*. It's no great discovery to find that organic theory takes terms which apply literally (at least in quotation marks "literally") to a growing plant and the achieved status of the full-grown plant, and tries to deal with the operant processes of the human mind and with the products of mind, including art, in terms which are literal for a plant, and transferred, or metaphorical, for a work of art or a poem.

I kept pursuing that, and I had basically written *The Mirror and the Lamp*, when I came across a book which may have been published earlier—but I think not, I think it hadn't come out then—by the philosopher Stephen Pepper, which was called *Root Metaphors*. His view was that each of the four basic types or classes into which he divides all metaphysics goes back to what

he calls a root metaphor. Some of these root metaphors are a little like the ones that I use in dealing with literary theory. It served to confirm for me the elucidation possible in thinking in terms of what I called—I think Pepper does not, but I labelled—“constitutive metaphors” as against casual or illustrative metaphors, which are brought in as ancillary to an exposition, but don’t constitute the key terms of the theory itself.

So all of these things are partly accident and what you happen to be reading, and partly preconditioned, in that it resonates with what you bring to what you’re reading. The direction you take seems to be a result of those two forces together.

SCHOCK: In *Shelley: A Critical Reading*, Earl Wasserman challenged your positing, in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, of a Platonistic dimension in the *Defence of Poetry*. I’m not aware that you replied to Wasserman on the subject. How do your views stand on the issue?

ABRAMS: I don’t remember Wasserman’s treatment, at this distant point, specifically enough to say that he expressly claims that there is no Platonic dimension in Shelley’s essay; but if he does, he’s just wrong, clearly. Shelley had read Plato, and what he wrote in the *Defence of Poetry* is clearly Platonic in some fashion. Whether it’s whole-hog Platonic or not isn’t the point, but clearly Shelley incorporated concepts from Plato, and even more, I think, from Plotinus and the Neoplatonics. Shelley’s theory is about as close to an archetypal theory in the mode of Northrop Frye as you’re going to find in the Romantic period, with the exception of Blake. Shelley arrives at a kind of archetypal view of what poems do: poems tell basically the same archetypal paradigm over and over again in all periods and in all times. He arrived at this view by way of the Platonic theory of Ideas.

SCHOCK: Yes. Even after having read Wasserman’s discussion, Shelley’s conception of what the poet imitates—the transcendent “order”—still seems to me to be at least analogous to Platonism.

ABRAMS: I think Wasserman was riding a hobbyhorse in trying to divest Shelley of Platonism. And I think the bias is an opposite overreaction to the overemphasis on Shelley as a Platonist—that book by Notopoulos, which makes Shelley out to be nothing else but an out-and-out Platonic theorist. The usual way in such matters is to oppose one extreme by being equally radical on the other extreme, and being no more right.

But what Wasserman does say that I agree with, as I recall, in his critique of what I did with Shelley’s critical theory, is that I had distorted Shelley’s views by trying to make them fit into my paradigm of Romantic expressive theories. That charge, I think, is true. If I were writing the book now, I wouldn’t deal with Shelley as I did then. I think I did him an injustice, because my view then was that good or valid poetic theories are not somehow true to the essence of poetry or art, but rather are heuristic devices,

speculative instruments, which should be judged by the degree to which they illuminate aspects of a poem, its organization, effects and so on, that otherwise we don't see, or don't see nearly so clearly. From that point of view I didn't see much heuristic value in Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*, and I tried to make it fit my preordained frame, which in that instance became a sort of Procrustes bed. I probably had to lop Shelley's theory off in a variety of ways.

And that was the wrong way to read Shelley; his is not a defense of poetry in terms of proposing a theory that would be useful in practical criticism; instead, it's a defense of poetry in terms of its continuing and indispensable value in human life as a product of the imagination, rather than of the rational element in man. And as such, Shelley's essay is one of the great, eloquent, and permanent statements of the value of poetry, written from the perspective through which he looked at poetry; that is, the whole family of great poets constitute a true family, and recurrently deal with the same paradigms, the same essential human concerns. It's an indispensable statement of the humane, enduring value of poetry, done in terms of Shelley's elected frame of reference. Yes, I did do Shelley an injustice. I was aware of that fact, even before Wasserman made it patent to me that my suspicion that I'd been unjust to Shelley was well-grounded. I think that is the one part of *The Mirror and the Lamp* (it's not a very large part, actually, the part in which I deal with Shelley's *Defence*) that I wouldn't be willing to stand by today. The rest, as far as I know, I'd still be willing to say, though perhaps with different emphases.

SCHOCK: What are you working on at the moment?

ABRAMS: What I'd like to do is take the very condensed lecture that I gave yesterday about art as such, the social conditions in the eighteenth century which fostered that theory of art, and the intellectual origins of its concepts, and expand it into a series of three or four lectures, for which I would for once be able to use slides. I'd love to have the advantage of my colleagues in the history of fine arts, who always show slides; no matter how boring the lecture is, the slides can be absorbing. I'd like to use slides, and then make the lectures into a short book. All my life I've had it as my ambition to write a short book, but they always get long. The trouble is that I'm repeatedly led astray by getting interested and involved with modern critical movements, and with what I want to say about those movements. Also, I have a couple of textbooks which sell so well that one can't afford to let them get out of date: *A Glossary of Literary Terms* and *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, of which I'm general editor and a period editor as well. Those books need periodic revision, and each time you revise one it takes a good part of a year, or sometimes more. You've got a tiger by the tail—you can't afford to let it go, and it pre-empts a large portion of your working time. And I also get drawn into other activities. I've been sitting on a variety of

national organizations and committees, one of the standard penalties of growing old in the profession.

So I'm constantly being deflected. I've been saying for three or four years that I'm going to do this expansion of my lecture, but I'm still stuck with a single lecture—the one I gave yesterday is a revised version of a paper I've had sitting around for at least three years, maybe more. Anyway, that's the thing I'd like most to do while I still can: the expansion of that lecture, with lots more detail about what happened during the eighteenth century to each of what only then came to be classified together as 'the fine arts.'

SCHOCK: When asked how he viewed his place in the contemporary fiction scene, Vladimir Nabokov once replied that it looked "jolly good from up here." How do you see your contribution to criticism and to literary theory?

ABRAMS: Well, when I was an undergraduate, I was studying Goethe, and I remember being struck by something he said at the age of twenty-five: "schon fünf-und-zwanzig Jahre und noch nichts für Ewigkeit gemacht" ("already twenty-five years old, and still nothing done for eternity"). I said, "the arrogance of that man, but I admire it." And there were books that were still being read when I was an undergraduate that had been written almost a century before—in intellectual history, books like Leslie Stephen's *English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*. And I developed an ambition, not to write something for eternity, but to write something that I hoped people would want to read fifty years after it was published. And so I set to work with great care on a book. I remember Dante said that his *Divine Comedy* "kept me thin for ten years." Well, *The Mirror and the Lamp* kept me thin for longer—of course the war intervened and knocked three or four years out of the middle of that span, but certainly no less than ten years—and with a result, I'm forced to admit, that is somewhat below that of Dante. I later worked just as hard, perhaps even longer, on *Natural Supernaturalism*. I don't care how my contribution to criticism and literary theory will stack up under the aspect of eternity, but I do hope I've written a couple of books that somebody or other may still be reading fifty years from now. That's the extent of my ambition.

SCHOCK: I'd say you'll reach it.

ABRAMS: I suddenly realize we're not that far from fifty years after *The Mirror and the Lamp* came out in 1953. 2003 will mark its fiftieth anniversary. I doubt that I'll be here to judge whether it's still being read, but you keep it in mind. You'll be around, so you ask, "anybody ever hear of a book called *The Mirror and the Lamp*?" Maybe someone will answer: "Oh, yes; isn't that the title of a novel published about 150 years ago?"