Lionel Trilling, Reluctant Critic

He wanted to be something he could not be and was sadly unsatisfied with being the best at his trade

By Joseph Epstein

The age of criticism”—that is what Randall Jarrell called the period between the 1930s and the early 1960s, a time when the power of literary criticism threatened to swamp the power of literature itself. In England, the magisterial T.S. Eliot was at work, as were F.R. Leavis, William Empson, L.A. Richards, and others. In America, Edmund Wilson was at the top of his game, and at our universities, the prestige of the critics who made their living on campuses—R.P. Blackmur, Allan Tate, Cleanth Brooks, and John Crowe Ransom among them—made the philologists and literary historians look like mere pedants.

The name missing from this roster of distinguished academic critics was the most famous of them all, Lionel Trilling. Then and now, Trilling doesn’t seem quite to fit in anywhere. He was never entirely comfortable with Columbia University, where he taught for decades—or, for that matter, with thinking himself an academic or even a critic. He was often listed among the group known as the New York Intellectuals, which included Philip Rahv, Irving Howe, Harold Rosenberg, Dwight Macdonald, Alfred Kazin, Delmore Schwartz, Lionel Abel, and others, but he was less political and more intellectually refined than they. He wrote for the same magazines they did—Partisan Review and Commentary here, Encounter in England—but he was never fully in the mix.

What set Trilling apart above all is that he was a critic not alone of literature but of that wider entity, culture. “My war,” he wrote to the English writer John Wain, “was always a cultural rather than a political one.” Culture, he noted in his essay “The Sense of the Past,” should be “studied and judged as life’s continuous evaluation of itself.” Cultural criticism, even when grounded in literary criticism, widens the lens, considers the outside forces that produce certain works, and reckons the importance of the works themselves to the culture that produced them. Thus Trilling, in a reconsideration of the novelist Sherwood Anderson, writes that Anderson was of “the tradition of the men who maintained a standing quarrel with respectable soci-
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By considering the novel through the lens of culture, Trilling could not merely assert but establish why *The Great Gatsby* seemed to grow better with the passage of time. Money, social class, snobbery, politics, history—all these fell within his purview as a cultural critic. *The Liberal Imagination* (1950), Trilling’s first collection, includes essays on the liberal imagination in literature, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Freud and Literature, Henry James’s *The Princess Casamassima*, intellectual magazines, *Huckleberry Finn*, Rudyard Kipling, Wordsworth’s “Immortality Ode,” art and neurosis, and *The Kinsey Report*. This partial table of contents gives some notion of his range. Criticism for Lionel Trilling was part of the history of ideas.

All the essays in this rich intellectual buffet remain readable today, which is remarkable for a work of criticism, a literary form not noted for its lengthy shelf life. If the book may be said to have a theme, it is the literary poverty of liberalism, the inability of writers under liberalism’s sway to convey in their writing anything like life’s rich complexity. The essay that gives the book its title ends by noting the contradiction that the writers most valued at the time, Yeats and Proust, Eliot and Joyce, D.H. Lawrence and André Gide, “are indifferent to, or even hostile to the tradition of liberal democracy as we know it.” Yet, Trilling argued, they supply what writers in the liberal tradition do not: “The sense of largeness, of cogency, of the transcendence which largeness and cogency can give, the sense of being reached in our secret and primitive minds—this we virtually never get from writers of the liberal democratic tradition at the present time.”

As the work of poets and novelists have voices, so, too, do those of critics. Trilling’s criticism was written in the voice of a highly intelligent companion—sophisticated, urbane, metropolitan—patiently explaining complex matters. As he writes in a letter of 1951 to his former student Norman Podhoretz:

> What I would have said about my own prose is that there is a need for a tone of reasonableness and demonstration, that it was of the greatest importance that we learn to consider that the tone of civil life has its necessity and may even have its heroic quality, that we must have a modification of all that is implied by the fierce posture of modern literature.

At its best, Trilling’s critical voice had a fine fluency, a measured modesty, and an authoritative persuasiveness. If Matthew Arnold, as he held, was “the first literary intellectual in the English-speaking world,” Trilling was the closest America has come to producing a descendant in Arnold’s line.

Trilling did not indulge in autobiographical allusions in his criticism. When he was alive, one acquired scraps of information about him from people who knew him. His own closest friend at Columbia was Jacques Barzun. Among his better-known students were Melvin Lasky, Norman Podhoretz, Steven Marcus, and Allen Ginsberg. He was a longtime—nearly a lifelong—psychoanalysand, undergoing three separate analyses. His wife Diana, herself a book reviewer for the *Nation* and more political than her husband, was a strong anti-Communist, in temperament a pure diva (without the music), and said to be impressively neurotic: fearful of ants in her food, terrified of heights, a true-believing Freudian. Life with her could not have been easy, though in a memoir, *The Beginning of the Journey*, written after her husband died, Diana Trilling claimed that life with him, his depression and erratic behavior generally, was not a day at the beach either.

Life in Culture: Selected Letters of Lionel Trilling provides the most extended intimate view of Trilling that we have. He was a prodigious correspondent; in one of his missives collected here, Trilling estimates that he writes 600 letters a year. The literary critic Adam Kirsch has produced an admirable selection that touches on Trilling the critic, the teacher, and the Jew, setting out his aspirations, his antipathies, his disappointments.

Trilling had an early Marxist phase, and as a young man served on the Committee to Defend Leon Trotsky. But as early as 1935, during a time “when we were all political,” he wrote to Jacques Barzun that he was “essentially a non-political man in point of activ-
For Trilling ‘the four transcendently great novelists’ were Dostoyevsky, Proust, Cervantes, and Dickens. He also much appreciated Balzac and called D.H. Lawrence ‘pretty great.’

For Trilling, literature, with its emphasis on the rich variety and fortuitousness of life, was the best antidote to too-confident politics. In his earlier days, there was “all the blindness and malign obfuscations of the Stalinoid mind of our time” to contend with. In later years, there were the superficialities of liberalism. “To the carrying out of the job of criticizing the liberal imagination, literature has a unique relevance . . . because literature is the human activity that takes the fullest and most precise account of variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty.” He added: “Unless we insist that politics is imagination and mind, we will learn that imagination and mind are politics, and of a kind we will not like.”

Owing to his standing as a critic, Trilling in 1958 was offered and turned down a job at Harvard, yet one of the revelations of Life in Culture is that Lionel Trilling preferred not to think of himself as a critic. His doubts about being a critic at all crop up through his letters and miscellaneous writings. This first appears in a letter of 1942 to the critic Newton Arvin, in which he writes of William Empson, Allen Tate, and Cleanth Brooks that “they've done good work and I've learned a great deal from them but I wonder if it is they who make me feel that though I want to write criticism I don't want to read it.” Six years later, to John Crowe Ransom, he described having “an impatience with myself in the role of critic, which often presents itself as an impatience with literature itself.” He added that “I never really think of myself as a critic.” To Isaiah Berlin he declared that he had “become impatient with criticism in general and find it harder and harder to read it.”

In an introduction to an anthology he edited called Literary Criticism: An Introductory Reader, Trilling asks whether criticism isn’t even inimical to literature. “There are times,” he writes, “when criticism seems beyond the point of literature and it is literature beyond the reach of criticism that we want, just as there are times when literature seems beside the point of life and it is life itself beyond the reach of literature we want.” He wrote to the French philosopher Étienne Gilson to thank him for noting that “I am not a literary critic.”

If Lionel Trilling preferred not to think himself a critic, what in fact did he think himself? In “Some
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Notes for an Autobiographical Lecture,” from 1971, he reports that he had originally envisioned himself as a novelist, and that the writing of criticism was “always secondary, an afterthought: in short, not a vocation, an avocation.” When he did write about literature, he tended not to examine it aesthetically but for its moral content. The moral imagination, the “questions raised by the experience of life and by the experience of culture and history,” as he put it, were his true subject.

Trilling’s sense of his relation to literature was acquired in his undergraduate days at Columbia in the 1920s under the sway of the great-books course called General Honors. In that course, the study of literature had no pretensions to scholarship. “It did not have in mind [as its aim] a learned man, a scholar,” Trilling writes, “but a well-read man, a widely read man, precisely an intelligent man, for there was an intelligence of the emotions and of task.” The study of literature and philosophy set out in the General Honors course showed the way of escaping the confines of one’s narrow social background by contemplating “great models of thought, feeling, and imagination, and great issues which suggested the close interrelation of the private and the personal life with the public life, with life in society.” The critic, then, in Trilling’s conception of him, was little more than an intelligent man reporting on the thoughts stirred by his reading.

If Lionel Trilling was less than enamored of the mantle of critic, neither, we learn from his letters, was he enamored of university teaching. First among his problems with it was Columbia, where he seems to have been given his job as much on sufferance as on merit. What both created was an annoyance born of the experience of life and by the experience of culture and history, as he put it, were his true subject.

Despite these misgivings, he had the reputation of a popular teacher. In an essay on Jane Austen written yet not completed at the end of his life, he recounts teaching a class that he had wished limited to 30 but which ended up with an enrollment of 150 students.

The students themselves began to seem a problem to him. In one of his best-known essays, “On the Teaching of Modern Literature” (1971), he sensed the arrival of what he termed “the adversary culture”—that radical counterculture that condemned and set out to destroy established culture, and its incipient prominence among students. In teaching the darker modern writers—Nietzsche, Dostoyevsky, Eliot—Trilling felt himself playing into the hands of this adversary culture. In the essay, he writes that to teach modern literature is “to engage in the process that we might call the socialization of the anti-social, or the acculturation of the anti-cultural, or the legitimization of the subversive: I asked them to look into the Abyss, and, both dutifully and gladly, they have looked into the Abyss, and the Abyss has greeted them with the grave courtesy of all objects of serious study, saying: ‘Interesting, am I not? And exciting, if you consider how deep I am and what dread beasts lie at my bottom. Have it well in mind that a knowledge of me contributes materially to your being whole, or well-rounded, men.’”

If Lionel Trilling was unhappy as a teacher and dissatisfied with his reputation as a critic, what, then, did he want? The answer comes through plainly enough in Life in Culture: He yearned to be a writer of fiction, a novelist. He had published a handful of stories and in 1947 a novel, The Middle of the Journey, about a group of middle-class progressives in the 1930s in a summer town that resembles Westport, Connecticut, who fall out over their relation to Soviet Communism. The novel never quite gets off the ground, and the characters fail to come alive, even though one of them was clearly based on the then very much alive Whitaker Chambers. The subject, which Trilling treats with great moral earnestness, might better have been played for comedy. Rereading the novel, I was reminded that I once mentioned to Saul Bellow that in the letters pages of the New York Review of Books, Irving Howe and Philip Rahv were engaged in a controversy over the nature of revolution. “Ah,” said Bellow, “two elderly Jews arguing noisily in the back of the syna-
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gogue. Approaching closer, one discovers what they are arguing about is Lady Astor's horse.”

In the letters in Life in Culture, Trilling is always about to get back to writing fiction. Soon after completing The Middle of the Journey, he hopes to write “a second, third, fourth novel” but never gets around to it. To Richard Chase he wrote that his “new novel has been going badly but I just begin to see it again.” In 1965, he told Irving Feldman that “I mean to begin a new novel in a few months . . . it engages me more and more deeply and the prospect makes me happy.” Instead he put in two years on The Experience of Literature, his anthology of literary criticism. In 1972, only three years before his death from pancreatic cancer, he informed the English publisher Frederic Warburg that he still thinks of writing novels “if I can get myself to have confidence in the possibility of its transcending the ‘reasonable’ tone of Middle of the Journey, of its taking itself out of my hands and going its own way.” At his death he left a portion of a novel, roughly a third completed, called The Journey Abandoned. It was published in 2008 by Columbia University Press. But it, too, stubbornly refused to reach, or even approximate, his ideal for the grand fiction of the moral imagination that was the name of his desire.

Of all the reviews of The Middle of the Journey, Trilling was especially aggrieved by that of Robert Warshow in Commentary. Among other deficiencies Warshow noted in the novel was its author’s failing to make any of his characters Jewish, when so many radicals in 1930s America had themselves been Jews. Trilling had a Jewish problem. He was nothing so pathetic as a self-hating Jew. Nor was he of that rarified type, the anti-Semitic Jew, or the superior Jew who looked down on other Jews. The problem was that he just didn’t see how his own Jewishness in any way influenced or had any connection with or meaning for him.

This comes up over and over again in his letters. This first time was in 1945 when he turns down the offer of becoming a member of the board of contributing editors of the newly fledged Commentary, responding to the offer by saying, “I do not think I am a man who should—let alone could—have a quasi-official position in Jewish life.” He informed the rabbi who was the counselor to Jewish students at Columbia that he could not accept his invitation to attend services because “I am not a synagogue goer and cannot properly appear as an example of one.” To another correspondent he wrote that the culture of Eastern European Jewry “has injured us all dreadfully,” adding that “the anti-sexual impulse of Eastern European Jews is extreme.” He wrote to Clement Greenberg that “I feared and disliked everything I knew about American Jewish life.” If he saw little value in Jewishness, he had little better to say about Judaism, the religion itself. To the English philosopher Alan Montefiore he wrote that “the nature of my alienation from Judaism is in large part an irritable response to the unsatisfactoriness—the dimness—of its theological utterances.” All this can seem, as the English say, a bit of a muchness coming from a man whose middle name was Mordecai.

Lionel Trilling wished not so much to disown or even to deny his Jewish connection as to seem above it or above any parochialism implicit in the connection with religion or ethnicity. He wanted to stake out a position of philosophical detachment, the detachment of a true critic of the culture. This he may have achieved, but at high cost to the would-be novelist. In a letter to Saul Bellow’s editor at Viking, Pat Covici, he praised Bellow’s 1953 breakthrough book The Adventures of Augie March, remarking that it “is Saul’s gift to see life everywhere” and going on to praise Bellow for forging a new style that “is really wonderful in its vivacity and energy, in its fusion of the colloquial and the intellectual tradition.”

Such a style wasn’t available to Trilling for his own fiction, owing to his withdrawal from the nub and rub of everyday life, to his very detachment. Aristotle spoke of tragedy as representing men as better than they are, comedy as representing them as worse. But it is the novel at its best that represents them as they really are. Such knowledge wasn’t available to Trilling. Wrapped in the cocoon of the university all his adult days, having retreated from the religion of his birth, he never had the experience of quotidian life required by the kind of novels he himself most admired. As with everyone who sets out on a career in art but discovers his talent isn’t up to his ambition, Lionel Trilling’s was in the end a disappointed life, one in which he had, much to his chagrin, to settle for being America’s last important critic. 

Lionel Trilling, Reluctant Critic: March 2019
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