Arts & Humanities

A Literary Filiation

Admirers and enemies of Norman Podhoretz so completely associate him with neoconservatism that few are aware that his intellectual life began well before 1960, when he became editor of *Commentary*. From his senior year at Columbia in 1949 through the 1950s, he had a charged, almost filial, relationship with his teacher, colleague, and friend, Lionel Trilling.

By
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Norman Podhoretz's best-known sentence may well be the first line of his 1967 memoir, *Making It*. "One of the longest journeys in the world is the journey from Brooklyn to Manhattan — or at least from certain neighborhoods in Brooklyn to certain parts of Manhattan." He was writing not about his hour-and-a-half subway ride, but about the journey from one universe to another.

The son of Jewish immigrants and the literary star of his class at prestigious Boys High, Podhoretz '50CC began the journey in the late 1940s, traveling six days a week from Brownsville to 116th Street and Broadway to pursue simultaneous bachelor's degrees at Columbia and the Jewish Theological Seminary. His father had been a milkman on a horse-drawn wagon, his mother a homemaker.They had no money to send their son to college, but he had won a Pulitzer Scholarship sufficient to pay the tuition at Columbia. There he dressed and often talked like a street-smart kid from Brooklyn, but at bottom he was a blooming intellectual — much to the gratification of teachers such as Moses Hadas, F.W. Dupee,Andrew J. Chiappe, and most notably Lionel Trilling '25CC, '38GSAS.

In his senior year, Podhoretz took Trilling's two-semester course in Romantic and Victorian poetry. Students kept journals in which they responded to the readings,Trilling's job being to quiz, prod, and encourage. Take Podhoretz's response to William Wordsworth's defense of "wise passiveness" — sitting on an "old grey

stone” in communion with nature — against an academically urgent “Where are your books?”:

> Carefully considered, the poetic argument becomes its own refutation.William is irritated by the habit of seeking wisdom in books, and he is certainly entitled to his private petulance. [*The attitude may be negative* (Trilling noted in the margin), *but is its quality peevish, capricious, ill-humored?*] Dreaming his time away on the old gray stone may perfectly well be an activity of worth and merit, but I confess that the abdication of will [*Again, what kind of will?*] espoused here rather irritates me, and I find it impossible to understand how Wordsworth could be blind to the simple fact that sense perceptions and consciousness will not develop of themselves. It is a pity that so dangerous an argument should be couched in verse of such charm.

Podhoretz was susceptible to the charm, but from the beginning he was alert to the implications of the argument — dangerous in this case.

Since high school Podhoretz had known his vocation would be literary, and he used to swear to girls histrionically that if he hadn’t become a great poet by 25 (the age at which John Keats had died), he would end his life.A look at the verses of John Hollander, Allen Ginsberg, or half a dozen others in Mark Van Doren’s poetry-writing class convinced him, however, that his real medium was prose. His aspirations fixed on Trilling: He would emulate him, a critic addressing literature, culture, and politics — and in essays that were themselves works of art. It was a more natural and attractive “career choice” for the brightest students then, in the late 1940s and early ’50s, than it has been since. Especially when the brightest had a model like Trilling to imitate.

To generations of Columbia students, Trilling was what a man of letters ought to be — soft-spoken, tweedy, handsome, and above all, an Anglophile. An instructor at Columbia from 1932 to 1936, pink-slipped, reinstated, and finally, on the strength of his book on Matthew Arnold, promoted to assistant professor, Trilling was the first Jew to achieve regular faculty status in his university’s English department.When Jewish students looked to him, though, it wasn’t always clear whether the aim of the Columbia experience was to produce a Jew who was also a gentleman (something that to the old guard on the faculty was a contradiction in terms), or a gentleman

whose Jewishness had been largely erased — to wit, in Podhoretz's words, "a reasonable facsimile of an upper-class WASP."

That question certainly hadn't been settled when, in 1950, Podhoretz won both a Fulbright and a Kellett Fellowship (the latter sends a Columbia graduate to Cambridge or Oxford) and went off for three years of English studies. He did not exactly leave his Jewishness behind — that was in his eyes neither possible nor desirable — but he did, in imitation of Trilling, determine to learn as much as he could about the almost entirely non-Jewish literary tradition the Columbia establishment held in such reverence.

He quickly put himself under the supervision of F. R. Leavis, who was to England what Trilling was to America, only more so, in that he not only founded a school of criticism (his student disciples going down from Cambridge to teach in schools all over the world), but also regarded literature as sacred. For Leavis, reading was a religious act with public consequences; for Trilling, it was a private pastime, serious but not holy. Podhoretz had, in fact, little difficulty making his own accommodation between Trilling's agnosticism and Leavis's religiosity. His peculiar voice emerged, with amazing speed, in his own critical essays. They manifested Leavis's insistence on aesthetic discrimination and moral sensibility, though not so rigid, and Trilling's clarity of exposition and suppleness of mind, though not so indecisive.

Cam and Hudson

The differences between the British and the American systems of university education were directly evident to Podhoretz at Cambridge. It surely wasn't just to make his old mentor feel good that, after a month, he wrote him that the Cambridge "English faculty . . . can't hold a candle to Columbia," and that "Even Leavis is disappointing," largely because he "dissipate[s] his energies attacking Bloomsbury and the Georgians all the time!" Podhoretz found himself working harder than at Columbia and yet, with the tripos (or final exams) nearly two years off, life seemed "much less strenuous," and

> the most wonderful thing of all is that there is no one to impress. . . . This is a phenomenon, incidentally, which is social as much as it is academic.You see, no one talks about literature at Cambridge — it would

> be most improper to get excited about a book. Intellectual activity is generally frowned upon . . . one simply does not spend one's time working while in residence — work is consigned to the vacations. As one of my neighbors told me the other day, "If we want to work, old boy, we don't come to Oxford or Cambridge; we go to one of the provincial universities." Teas, cocktail parties, and especially games are primary values here; mind is all right, but not really very important.

The following year, 1951, Leavis bestowed a signal honor on Podhoretz by asking him to review Trilling's *The Liberal Imagination* for *Scrutiny*, the quarterly he had been editing since 1932 and the best such magazine in the world. Podhoretz's review of the landmark collection of essays, on subjects ranging from *Huckleberry Finn* to *The Kinsey Report*, was favorable and intelligent, yet, as he told Trilling afterward,"I still don't have an original idea in my head. It's strange, isn't it, that a situation which I used to think would finally supply irrefutable testimony to my talents should have actually given me, for the first time, some real honest-to-goodness humility."

Humble, but still appropriately proud of his "talents," and of what Columbia had done to cultivate them. Yes, he wrote to Trilling in June 1951, the gentlemanly pace of life at Cambridge was "a marvellous corrective" to the competitive atmosphere of the Columbia campus,

> but the kids who come up directly from school are more in need of a dose of our kind of thing.There is, as you know, no general education at the university; as a matter of fact, it stops at the age of 16 when everybody begins to specialize . . . The result is that you find medical students who've never heard of Hegel, historians who know vaguely of Donne, people reading English who haven't read Rabelais.

Still, Podhoretz felt, the Cambridge "system couldn't be better contrived to do all that Columbia failed to do for me. It's given me a taste of the good life, of what it means to be a social being, of working in comfort and in a relaxed atmosphere; it's making me learn — in your phrase — how much more important it is to be private than public, and it's teaching me what that 'private' implies" — namely, the enjoyment of everyday manifestations of "music" and "grace" in the springtime beauties of Cambridge, where he didn't mind "lounging on the Backs or lolling in

those plush punts . . . for 3 shillings an hour.”

In November 1951 Podhoretz wrote Trilling about a rumor circulating around Cambridge “that you are, quite literally, my foster-father.The Levites [i.e., priestly Leavisites], bewildered by the fact that a critical work received a wholly favorable notice in Scrutiny, had to find some explanation, and the foster-father hypothesis seems to have gained currency all over the place.”A shared joke, but Trilling did take a paternal interest in Podhoretz’s account of his travels during the “long vac” of the previous summer. It had been a Grand Tour very much in the Byronic tradition, going from Paris to Athens, but extending à la Benjamin Disraeli all the way to Jerusalem:

> I climbed the Acropolis by sunlight and moonlight, took long walks through the Agora, poured libations into the Mediterranean, loudly deplored Turkish invasions; I covered almost every inch of Israel, spent lots of time in Kibbutzim, fell in love with the Yemenites, argued endlessly about What is Judaism, Who is a Jew, and Why Not, explored Tel Aviv (which is vile), Jerusalem (which Jehovah did well to choose as his city), Haifa (which is lovely, but loaded with anti-Semitic Germans who refuse to learn Hebrew), attended election meetings, became very depressed over a demoralized population, and finally went away a sadder and wiser man, with a slightly bitter taste in my mouth and a sense of having been strangely dispossessed. I felt more at home in Athens!

Trilling copied out this passage and more to send to his friend Elliot Cohen, editor of Commentary, the monthly magazine started by the American Jewish Committee in 1945 to replace the defunct Menorah Journal and to reach out to a wider, college-educated audience. Along with the quarterly Partisan Review, it was the most important generalist intellectual serial publication in America.

Trilling recommended Podhoretz “as that remarkable undergraduate of mine who went to Cambridge . . . He’s a first-class Hebraist (ancient and modern), a good writer, and a brilliant scholar, now involved in history and philosophy as well as in literature.” This letter, soon answered for Cohen by his managing editor, Irving Kristol, began a relationship between Podhoretz and *Commentary* that would run from his first piece for the magazine (a review of Bernard Malamud’s *The Natural* in 1953), through his 35 years as editor (1960 to 1995), to the essays in criticism and

cultural-political polemic he has been writing, since his retirement, as editor-at-large.

Podhoretz got a then-very-rare “first” on the tripos and returned to Cambridge for a third year as a PhD student. He was planning a thesis on Disraeli’s political novels — an ideal way of working at what Trilling had called “the bloody crossroads where politics and literature meet” — and in the spring of 1953 he submitted an essay, essentially a précis of the thesis, to Scrutiny. Leavis’s response, however, was irascibly particularist: “Disraeli is better known in England than you assume. . . .Your references to history, etc., are so obviously, for an Englishman, from the outside — from someone who doesn’t know nearly enough and whose cultural ‘knowledge’ is oddly wrong.” Podhoretz’s essay (he never again tried to publish it) is, from an American point of view,“oddly” right as an introduction to this aspect of Disraeli’s career, but Leavis’s judgment was determinative. Podhoretz abandoned the idea of doing a Cambridge PhD.

Besides, he was running out of fellowship money. He came home and put himself before his draft board. He wanted to serve in the army, believing it would give him the sort of ordinary American male’s rite of passage that seven years of being academically brilliant at Columbia and Cambridge had, for all their delights, denied him. His draft board didn’t oblige him until December, however, and so for five months he was a “dangling man,” free to write essays for *Commentary*, notably an appreciative but firmly dissenting piece on Saul Bellow’s T*he Adventures of Augie March* that made him enough enemies among New York literati to last a lifetime, and a survey of television drama quite as good as the criticism of popular culture then being pioneered by his mentor at the magazine, Robert Warshow.

Warshow had indeed become the portrait of the writer Podhoretz wanted to resemble, and Warshow’s pieces had profoundly impressed Trilling, too (in 1962 he wrote an introduction to *The Immediate Experience*, the posthumous collection of essays that soon gained cultic status).When in the spring of 1955, Warshow died of a heart attack — he was only 38 — it was shattering to many New York intellectuals. “I don’t know of any death that had the strange stopping effect of Bob’s,” Trilling wrote Podhoretz, then stationed in Germany. “His youth, of course, had something to do with it, but there was more than that. He had a remarkable power of engaging affection . . . but the shock of his death went even beyond the love people had for him. It seemed to me that many of us — for suddenly there was an ‘us’ — had realized the fact of death almost for the first time.”

Warshow's death made Trilling anxious about Podhoretz's plan, once he was discharged, to assume the position as associate editor being held for him at *Commentary*. Warshow would no longer be there to guide and protect him, especially in an office where Cohen, suffering from the bipolar disorder that eventually led to his suicide in 1959, was less and less effective, and where the Greenberg brothers, Martin and Clement ("Clem" was the supreme art critic of the day), were, as managing and associate editors, an in-tandem "boss" naturally suspicious of what this whippersnapper from Columbia and Cambridge might try to do to their magazine. Perhaps, Trilling suggested, Podhoretz "should conceive again the possibility of an academic career."

Not that Trilling himself was then feeling sanguine about *anything*, academic, literary, or existential. In April 1955 he complained that the critical reception of his recent collection of essays, *The Opposing Self*, had simply been too nice: "There is nothing to worry about with me, I'm not going to make any technical gaffes, I have a very good mind and quite a prose style, though difficult: and nobody in the least notices what I am saying. Misunderstood, you see." Which echoes a despondency he had expressed to Podhoretz in January of that year, more directly pertinent to the young man's chosen vocation:"I can't help feeling that criticism, in the way I have up to now conceived of it, is at an end for me, and that I shall have to go on to something more venturesome and elaborate. I feel the sense of something having come to an end as generally pervasive." He had heard both the younger Steven Marcus and the older Richard Chase say there was no point attacking bad books because they couldn't picture the audience for whom they would be "displaying anger and contempt . . .Well,we shall all have to make efforts to move to a higher plane."

A higher plane is what Trilling could see Podhoretz reaching for in the discerning reviews he began to do for the *New Yorker* — it was a tremendous coup to be writing for that bible of the middlebrow as well as for the highbrow *Partisan Review* and, of course, *Commentary*. Podhoretz answered Trilling's dissatisfaction about the aimlessness of literary criticism by saying that, though a bolder and "more venturesome" scrutiny of poems and stories was indeed desirable, his own and Trilling's "energy and devotion and talent" required other outlets. He eventually discovered his own most authentic mode in the personal, reflective essay, starting in 1963 with "My Negro Problem — and Ours." Trilling, who always wanted to be a fiction writer more than anything, actually was most himself in the impersonal,

reflective essay. His prose was sinuous, and not coming to a point — resisting the temptations of ideological certainty — was exactly the point.The 1960s, however, would call for something firmer — a staked position about the tactics of the civil rights movement, the war on communism in Vietnam, and, particularly on his own campus, the New Left's defiance of "the Establishment." A writer in and of the middle, like his liberal-conservative heroes Wordsworth, Jane Austen, Arnold, or Henry James, Trilling could not in the end satisfy his fellow intellectuals either on the left or on the right.

Podhoretz would go on to address him from both flanks, and Trilling's reactions were predictable. He thought his former pupil, now his sometime editor, too radical during the early '60s, when *Commentary* was publishing and promoting the work of, say, Paul Goodman and Norman Mailer; too confessional in *Making It*; and too overcorrectively conservative in the early '70s.

In hindsight, Podhoretz came to sympathize with Trilling's doubts about those early- and mid-'60s editorial choices, but he questioned the apparently bad faith of advising him not to publish *Making It* when one of its themes — that intellectuals are as ambitious for power, fame, and even money as business people, politicians, and other worldly movers and shakers are — was something Trilling himself had taught him. Finally, he was puzzled over the post-1968 bafflement and fatigue that kept Trilling from stating publicly what amounted to agreement with his own position on affirmative action and meritocracy.

More Light

When Trilling lay dying in 1975, however, his conversations with Podhoretz were less about politics than, as in the old days, about literature. Podhoretz had been rereading Thomas Mann's Doctor Faustus, which finds in the life of an imagined musical composer an analogue to the course of 20th-century German history. Back in the late 1940s and early 1950s,Trilling had taken a dim view of Mann's sympathetic relations with communist East Germany and downgraded him as an artist. Now, however, if Podhoretz said that Mann may turn out to be the century's greatest novelist, then Trilling might have to reconsider. Alas, as he rapidly succumbed to cancer, there wasn't time for that, or for anything else.

A quarter of a century had passed since Trilling had perused the notebooks and papers of the cocky kid from Brownsville who, all in all, would become his favorite undergraduate pupil — who wrote those eloquently analytical letters about Cambridge and Israel — and who, starting in the mid-1950s, was clearly among the most brilliant and productive of the third and last generation of New York intellectuals. After Lionel's death, Diana Trilling sent Podhoretz her husband's personal copy of Wordsworth and Coleridge's Lyrical Ballads. "I hope it will give you pleasure as a remembrance of your days as a student of Lionel's." How could it not?

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