Arts & Humanities

Lionel Trilling at Columbia

Lionel Trilling's masterly essays mapped the terrain where literary, political, and social questions overlapped. His friend and colleague Quentin Anderson also remembers him as a devoted teacher and mentor who was fiercely loyal to Columbia .

By
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Summer 2001

Lionel Trilling '25C '38GSAS joined the Department of English and Comparative Literature in 1932, a membership that proved lifelong. He had earlier written stories and reviews for the College paper, for a Jewish magazine called *The Menorah Journal* , and for the *New York Evening Post*, and had taught at the University of Wisconsin and Hunter College. He married Diana Rubin in 1929, and their son, James, was born in 1948.

Trilling's senior colleagues in the department were uneasy about his continued presence ostensibly on the ground that "as a Freudian, a Marxist, and a Jew" he might not be happy at Columbia. The young teacher's response was a denial so firm and persuasive that it resulted in his retention-and a growing regard for his work. (He had no shred of Communist piety but no impulse to deny what many educated people shared-respect for the intelligence of Marx.)

The publication of *Matthew Arnold*, his Columbia dissertation, led President Butler "under his summer powers" to promote him to assistant professor. Diana Trilling described both episodes in "Lionel Trilling, a Jew at Columbia" in the March 1979 *Commentary*.

The Liberal Imagination (1950), his first volume of essays, enforces the demand Trilling made in all his work that we should look at the imaginative consequences of our politics and the political consequences of our use of the imagination. Liberal

politics, he argued, while itself rooted in sentiment and concerned with asserting the importance of human emotion, also tended to deny the concrete reality and individuality of human feeling and imagination. The study of literature might help to correct this tendency. Trilling had found an understanding of the tie between moral principles and the imagination in the English novelist E.M. Forster, the subject of a book Trilling published in 1943. But the first full development of his views on the relations between politics and the imagination appears in *The Liberal Imagination*, which drove his views home and had an effect no less than national. Insofar as liberalism depends on a belief that the primary political reality is realized in individual human beings, could Americans be called "liberal" when we substituted abstract zeal for an awareness of our existing human situation? Trilling's most concise treatment of this contradiction comes from an introduction to his novel, *The Middle of the Journey*: "This negation [of the human situation] was one aspect of an ever more imperious and bitter refusal to consent to the conditioned nature of human existence."

The important preface to *The Liberal Imagination* also explores the tension between liberalism's conscious principles and its actual consequences for the imagination. The volume opens with essays on minor American writers and then moves with greater power and interest to a theme Trilling commanded, "Freud and Literature," and thereafter to the authority of the great essays of the 1940s and 1950s, "Manners, Morals and the Novel" and "Art and Fortune." Along the way current concerns are visited, as in the essay on *The Kinsey Report*, which deals with prevailing attitudes toward sexuality, and a study of current little magazines, including *Partisan Review*. All in all, the collection announced and established a new critical eminence among us and was an enormous success. (Though it was of greatest value, perhaps, to those whom it led to take a continuing interest in Trilling's works, many such readers eventually came to cherish his later works more.)

A comedy of ideas

Trilling's only novel, *The Middle of the Journey* (1947), was reissued in 1975 with a 25-page introduction and appeared once again in 1980 in the twelve-volume Uniform edition of the works of Lionel Trilling published posthumously by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. This edition was supervised by Diana Trilling, who also selected

the materials for *Speaking of Literature and Society*, a volume of hitherto uncollected essays and reviews, and for *The Last Decade*, which contains the essays of his last ten years.

The introduction Trilling added to the novel treated questions regarding a character called Gifford Maxim, who was based on Whittaker Chambers, a Columbia College student at the same time as Trilling. Chambers subsequently joined the Soviet espionage apparatus, and Trilling encountered him again when, after breaking with the Communist Party, Chambers sought to reestablish a public identity to make it harder for the party to assassinate him.

Trilling did not know when he published the novel that Whittaker Chambers would become a public figure in the Hiss-Chambers affair, in which Chambers accused Alger Hiss, who had been an important member of the State Department, of having been a Soviet agent. The novel's central characters, aside from Maxim and the narrator John Laskell, are a couple called Arthur and Nancy Croom, middle-class radicals and sympathizers with the Soviet Union. So close, apparently, was the resemblance between the Crooms as Trilling described them and Alger and Priscilla Hiss that many readers, including close friends of the Hisses, thought that Trilling had based the characters of the Crooms on them and had had prior knowledge of Chambers's connection to the Hisses. In fact, Trilling says in his introduction: "The name Hiss was unknown to me until some months after my novel had appeared."

Maxim's fear of assassination is important to the novel's portrayal of the "liberal imagination" because the Crooms do not believe the danger Maxim fears is real, and indeed are shocked by Maxim's belief that the Communist Party would be capable of such wickedness. One of the shrewdest of Trilling's devices is to find in this mistaken trustfulness an occasion for Laskell's discovery of the denials of reality associated with radical political convictions. There are still more central grounds for this discovery, including the unwillingness of the Crooms, the hero's hosts, to consider the fact of death-real indeed to their guest, who has recently recovered from a very dangerous illness.

The novel constituted a grave and inclusive attack on the pieties of the middleclass radicalism of its time. It was not received with universal applause. The chief of the contemporary pieties it offended was the faith among Communist sympathizers that the world could be remade in accord with our personal demands. When John Laskell steps into Nancy Croom's flower bed of cosmos while trying to talk to her about

death, Nancy says, "John, get out of my cosmos!" And while she thinks she is talking about flowers, we, like Laskell, realize that she is acting to cancel the reality of a friend's emotions if they interfere with her attempt to deny death through political hope.

Trilling notes that the English edition of his novel was better received. Perhaps the English of 1947 took it for granted that ideas had a clear relation to the intellectual groups and social classes that adopted them. An English identity was achieved *after* one had willy-nilly accepted the fact of one's social origin and the social milieu-perhaps a very different one-that one had come to occupy. It is harder for Americans, born more like gods of their own creation, to accept the idea of an intellectual milieu or a social class, except as something altogether foreign. Americans do not have much feeling for the social comedy of ideas.

The major essays

The Opposing Self (1955) is titled for an observation Trilling attributes to Hegel, who had held that in the eighteenth century individuals came to oppose the self to the culture in which it had grown. This conception of the self was to be a central theme in Trilling's later work, particularly in his discussion of authenticity in *Sincerity and Authenticity*.

A Gathering of Fugitives (1956) prints the introductions Trilling had done for The Reader's Subscription, a book club headed by W.H. Auden, Jacques Barzun, and Trilling. *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972) presents the lectures Trilling delivered as Charles Eliot Norton Professor at Harvard in 1970. Trilling had earlier edited an anthology called *The Experience of Literature*, published in 1967. The prefaces to the individual selections it contains comprise a volume in the Uniform edition. The present writer suggests that the original anthology, including Trilling's prefaces together with the works they deal with, make an excellent introduction to the powers and interests of Trilling himself.

Beyond Culture (1965) contains powerful essays on Jane Austen's *Emma*, on Isaac Babel, on the modern view of pleasure, and on other topics. One of these, "On the Teaching of Modern Literature," is more often discussed than others nowadays because it is thought to have a particular importance for students of literature. This

essay demands nothing less than full attention, and I can't attempt to give it that here, except to note that those whose lives are exclusively devoted to money and success find little sanction or excuse in its pages.

Of this book as a whole, Diana Trilling, the editor, notes, "A central enterprise of the volume is its search for a way out of the adversary culture which will not preclude a genuine experience of life. One such rescue from the tyrannies of contemporary cultural subversion Trilling finds in Freud's tragic acceptance of the biologically given." The speech Trilling addressed to the New York Psychoanalytic Society in 1955 gives the volume its title. It was the first occasion on which the members of the society were addressed by someone outside their number. It should be noted that Trilling collaborated with Steven Marcus '48C '61GSAS to produce a one-volume version of Ernest Jones's three-volume biography of Freud.

Trilling also wrote a number of short stories, and Mrs. Trilling edited a volume of these for the Uniform edition, with a title drawn from the best known of them, "Of This Time, of That Place." The volume includes the often anthologized "The Other Margaret" as well as a number of stories bearing on Jewishness.

Trilling, who became an associate professor at Columbia in 1945, was made a full professor in 1948, and thereafter achieved the University's highest honor, becoming a University Professor in 1970. He was awarded a number of honorary degrees by American institutions including Harvard, Northwestern, Case Western Reserve, Brandeis and Yale; he also received Honorary Litt. D. degrees from the universities of Durham and Leicester in England. He held the Eastman Professorship at Oxford (1965) and was later appointed a Visiting Fellow at All Souls College, Oxford (1972-73). In 1951, Trilling became a member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters and a Fellow of the Academy of Arts and Letters. In 1972 he received the first Thomas Jefferson Award in the Humanities. His lecture on that occasion was entitled "Mind in the Modern World."

Some people were convinced that Trilling was an anglophile. In fact he rejected the offer of a distinguished post in England. His American identity was precious to him, and it bore on his views on the citizen's duty.

In England, even more than in this country, it was commonly held in the 1950s that one must not name names when questioned by the government about someone's Communist sympathy or affiliation. Trilling, on the contrary, held that it was not

dishonorable for an American citizen to answer such questions. A number of his colleagues in the College, including good friends of his, differed sharply, according to Diana Trilling, but one can infer from the introduction to *The Middle of the Journey* that he never changed his view.

College loyalties

Early in their careers in the College, Trilling and Jacques Barzun '26C '32GSAS taught the Senior Colloquium, and I was lucky enough to take the course with them in 1936-37. For me (and I am sure it was true of others also) the experience was unique and unforgettable. The College of those years had a splendid staff, and many students had occasion to rejoice as I did.

Trilling was to become a friend when I began teaching in the College in 1939, and it may be useful to note something I found characteristic in him. He took teaching very seriously. For him it was an occasion to judge, to offer praise, and to seek to see what powers the student had and how they were being employed. If they were being wasted or misapplied he made it his responsibility to try to help. When I became his colleague and friend I was on occasion privy to these efforts and to his sustained fidelity to the obligations of teaching.

In those years the College offered a three-year course in English literature from the earliest times to the end of the nineteenth century. Trilling taught the third year over a long period. The course embraced works of the Romantics and the Victorians, and one of Trilling's happiest achievements is the essay on Keats he published in *The Opposing Self*. Another figure by whom he set great store was Wordsworth and there was an annual struggle with an often resistant group of juniors and seniors to win them to recognition of the poet's powers. Among the Victorians, the novels and tales of Henry James stood high for Trilling. His interest in the cultural office of the novel carried over to the twentieth century, as many of his essays attest.

One of the recollections of my colleague that stands out for me is how persistently thoughtful he was about the ongoing affairs of the College wing of the department. His heart was there. He taught graduate courses and supervised dissertations, but the College had his deepest loyalty.

The reader of this brief account of a remarkable man, whose abilities exceeded those of any other I have ever encountered, might be excused for wondering how he exhibited the powers I saw in him. I despair of conveying more than a suggestion of the fascination offered by a particular work. *Sincerity and Authenticity* consists of six lectures delivered at Harvard in the spring of 1970. He traces the idea of sincerity through the 400 years of its employment in England and elsewhere and its fascinating permutations from Rousseau and Diderot (in his *Rameau's Nephew*) through Goethe and Hegel, to such amazing cultural landmarks as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Among other things, he teaches us what an extraordinary wealth of meaning is contained in the customary signature of our letters, "Sincerely yours." How authenticity then arose as a standard and at what cost we learn in the lectures that followed. The final lecture in the series concludes with extraordinary force. The chapter is called "The Authentic Unconscious," and the term "unconscious," though it had been Freud's, is not here used with reference to psychoanalysis but to a transformation in its meaning, which reaches its apogee in a shocking moment of the 1960s. Trilling quotes two British psychiatrists, David Cooper and R.D. Laing. In an introduction to the English translation of Michel Foucault's *Histoire de la folie*, Cooper had written: "What madness is is a form of vision that destroys itself by its own choice of oblivion in the face of existing forms of social tactics and strategy. Madness, for instance, is a matter of voicing the realization that I am (or you are) Christ."

Trilling characterizes Cooper's view as follows: "So far from being an illness, a deprivation of any kind, madness is health fully realized at last." He then quotes Laing as saying that "true sanity entails in one way or another the dissolution of the normal ego, that false self completely adjusted to our alienated social reality."

Trilling comments:
"Who that has had experience of our social reality will doubt its alienated condition? And who that has thought of his experience in the light of certain momentous speculations made over the last two centuries, of which a few have been touched on in these pages, will not be disposed to find some seed of cogency in a view that proposes an antinomian reversal of all accepted values, of all received realities?

"But who that has spoken, or tried to speak, with a psychotic friend will consent to betray the masked pain-his bewilderment and solitude-by making it the paradigm of liberation from the imprisoning falsehoods of an alienated social reality? Who that finds intelligible the sentences which describe madness (to use the word that cant

prefers) in terms of trascendence and charisma will fail to penetrate to the great refusal of human connection that they express, the appalling belief that human existence is made authentic by the possession of a power, or the persuasion of its possession, which is not to be qualified or restricted by the co-ordinate existence of any fellow man? . . .

"Perhaps exactly because the thought is assented to so facilely, so without what used to be called seriousness, it might seem that no expression of disaffection from the social existence was ever so desperate as this eagerness to say that authenticity of personal being is achieved through an ultimate isolateness and through the power that this is presumed to bring. The falsities of an alienated social reality are rejected in favor of an upward psychopathic mobility to the point of divinity, each one of us a Christ- but with none of the inconveniences of undertaking to intercede, of being a sacrifice, of reasoning with rabbis, of making sermons, of having disciples, of going to weddings and to funerals, of beginning something and at a certain point remarking that it is finished."

The fierceness of this denunciation is unmatched in Trilling, but it conveys the passion he everywhere brought to considering the relation between emotions and ideas.

As I approach my conclusion I must not fail to remark that Trilling wished to speak for and to everyone, and not for a particular sect or party. He sought to do this by speaking on each occasion from the freedom of a judgment unconstrained by doctrine.

I am reminded of one of my happiest memories of him. John Thompson 1902C and I loved fly-fishing and taught Trilling to fish. One day a shout of pleasure from a neighboring pool greeted us. It was his celebration of his first ten-inch trout.

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