CHAPTER SIX

CULTURE AND KULCHUR

There is an essential ambiguity in the word "culture." "Culture" means, on the one hand, "that complex of activities which includes the practice of the arts and of certain intellectual disciplines, the former being more salient than the latter." It is in this sense that we talk about "high" culture or popular culture. On the other hand, we may mean by "culture" something much more inclusive—"a people's technology, its manners and customs, its religious beliefs and organization, its systems of valuation, whether expressed or implicit," all that "hum and buzz of implication" which is behind a people's habits of life, of work, of food, of play. This is the anthropologist's use of the word. These two meanings of the word, Trilling says, give us the "dubious privilege" of being able to say that "a certain culture sets a higher store by culture than does some other culture."¹

But there is a third sense as well in which "culture" may be used and that was the meaning with which Arnold almost uniformly employed it. Culture, we must remember,

¹Trilling, "Preface" to BC, p. xi.
was the remedy that Arnold prescribed to Englishmen for curing their disease of materialism, insularity, prejudice and complacency. Thus culture is the pursuit of perfection, of inward perfection. Culture is the disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that has been thought and said in the world. Culture refuses to dwell in the "sty of contentment." "Not a having and a resting, but a growing and a becoming, is the character of perfection as culture conceives it." In this insistence on growth as well as in conceiving of perfection as an "inward condition of the mind and spirit," culture is at one with religion. Culture is also at one with religion in that it envisages a general perfection, in that it requires the individual to carry others along with him in his march towards perfection. But culture goes beyond religion in that it aims at the expansion of "all the powers which make the beauty and worth of human nature." Culture thus endeavours to effect the fulfilment of our intellectual, aesthetic as well as our moral faculties. It takes us beyond Hebraism which consists in moral perfection and leads us, with the help of Hellenism, to an all-inclusive perfection.

Arnold's use of the term then is basically normative rather than descriptive--he posits culture as an ideal to

²Arnold, Culture and Anarchy, p. 48.
be striven for. On the other hand, Trilling hardly ever uses the word in the Arnoldian sense. He generally employs the term in its sociological or anthropological sense to refer to the habits, practices, implicit and expressed beliefs, to the institutions, to the style of a society. Thus about Tacitus: "In writing of political events, his real interest is not in their political meaning, but rather in what we would now call their cultural meaning, in what they tell us of the morale and morals of the nation." Or he may mean the pressure that these beliefs, assumptions, etc. exert on individuals, forcing them to conform. ("We do not need to have a very profound quarrel with American culture to feel uneasy because our defenses against it, our modes of escape from it, are becoming less and less adequate." Often both senses may co-exist: "we make it that much harder to escape the culture, we cut off the possibility of those triumphs of the mind that are won in the face of culture, if we impose the idea of a self that is wholly dependent upon the culture for its energy and health." Elsewhere, he employs the term to refer to the


5 Ibid., p. 117.
aesthetic and intellectual pursuits of a set of people at a given time: ". . . if the program of our present artistic and intellectual culture has not changed from that of forty or fifty years ago . . ."6 Or, lastly, the reference may be to the beliefs, the motivations, the "pieties," of such a group, e.g. the group of American liberal intellectuals. ("Our culture peculiarly honours the act of blaming, which it takes as the sign of virtue and intellect."7)

The semantic fields of the word "culture" for the two critics would then appear to be different. If perhaps we were driven to describe the two men in set terms, we might say that the one was a cultural missionary, the other a cultural historian. To put the matter even more pedantically, Trilling's concern is with culture, Arnold's for culture.

But a difference in terminology ought not to be allowed to lead us into simplifications about the two critics' life-long preoccupations. Besides, such a simplification would be resisted by the complexity of Trilling's mind and thought. Even a glance at the titles of some of his books

6Trilling, "Preface" to BC, p. xiii.

7Trilling, "F. Scott Fitzgerald," in LI, p. 246. The problem presented by Trilling's use of the pronoun "we" is discussed in Chapter Eight.
(The Liberal Imagination, The Opposing Self, Beyond Culture) should suggest that behind, or emerging out of, his recording of every cultural phenomenon, there is an evaluation however mildly or ironically or suavely expressed. And governing all such evaluations is a normative concept, however complex, however finely modulated, however inclusive, of what constitutes a civilized human being, what constitutes a living and informed society and a meaningful polity. If once again we may disturb Trilling's spirit by indulging an impulse to the pointed phrase, the study of a culture is a means of establishing Culture. The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate this deeper concern behind all Trilling's cultural investigations.

Now Arnold and Trilling are at one in assigning a central place to literature in their concept of culture (though, as we have noted, they use the term "culture" itself in different senses). To Arnold "culture" is "a total imaginative vision of life with literature at its center, the regulating and normalizing element in social life, the human source, at least, of spiritual authority." Trilling holds that the cultural critic must perforce be a literary critic. Referring to Parrington's disclaimer that he had set up shop as a literary critic, Trilling points out that

"it is not exactly a matter of free choice whether or not a cultural historian shall be a literary critic." For, what we call culture is only "the locus of the meeting of literature with social actions and attitudes."^9

There is a passage in "A French Eton" which we may take as the next stage of our argument and which points beyond Arnold to Trilling's concerns too:

It is the middle class which has real mental ardour, real curiosity; it is the middle class which is the great reader; that immense literature of the day which we see surging up all round us—literature the absolute value of which it is almost impossible to rate too humbly, literature hardly a word of which will reach, or deserves to reach, the future—it is the middle class which calls it forth, and its evocation is at least a sign of a widespread mental movement in that class. Will this movement go on and become fruitful; will it conduct the middle class to a high and commanding pitch of culture and intelligence? That depends on the sensibility which the middle class has for perfection; that depends on its power to transform itself.^11

In our time, the questions have become more crucial; the membership of the class—the class which has both produced and consumed works of imagination and intellect—has increased enormously. But the question remains basically

^9 Trilling, "Reality in America," in LI, p. 23.

^10 Trilling, "Dr Leavis and the Moral Tradition," in AGF, p. 105.

the same: what books do we write—and/or read? and how do we read them? If a man is known by the company of books he keeps, so is a culture as a whole. We shall know a culture, and the culture it sets store by, by seeing what literature it creates and fosters. If it is true, as W.H. Auden said, that a real book reads us, not we it, then it is a matter of some importance what books we allow ourselves to be read by, what we are found wanting in by them, and how well we are read by them. It is also of consequence whether there are a sufficient number of such "real" books which can "engage" us in an active, intimate relationship, and what "hidden meanings" in us they can discover and how many more of such meanings they can so discover in us with every reading. This is after all the meaning of culture—and it is remarkable how in the process the objective of "literary criticism" becomes not so much the achievement of some belletristic "taste" or even a scientific critical "technique" for "figuring out" literary works, as the attainment of the ability to understand ourselves. Books are valuable for the self-knowledge and the knowledge of our

12 Trilling, quoting Auden's remark, relates how he himself has been read by *Ulysses*, *The Castle*, *Remembrance of Things Past*, etc., and how "some of these books at first rejected me; I bored them. But as I grew older and they knew me better, they came to have more sympathy with me and to understand my hidden meanings. Their nature is such that our relationship has been very intimate" ("On the Teaching of Modern Literature," in *BC*, p. 8).
culture that they give us. The central questions then are: how do we come to create the works we do, and how do we happen to read and hold dear these books and not others, and how do we happen to read them this way and not in other ways? And the answers to these questions also provide the answer to the most important question of all: what do we aspire to in life?

There are, for instance, cultural reasons for our dislike of Mansfield Park. Believing as we do in a concept of liberal democracy, we prefer the dialectical mode of judgment to the categorical. But of all Jane Austen's novels Mansfield Park alone betrays an impulse to condemn and not to forgive. We value social freedom but Mansfield Park celebrates social stasis. We prize vivacity of spirit but this novel, though it "takes full notice of spiritedness, vivacity, celerity and lightness," rejects them "as having nothing to do with virtue and happiness, as being, indeed, deterrents to the good life." And we find it impossible to like Fanny Price, the heroine of Mansfield Park, for she is "overtly virtuous and consciously virtuous." We think virtue is really virtue only when "it manifests itself as a product of 'grace' operating through a strong inclination to sin. Our favorite saint is likely to be Augustine; he is sweetened for us by his early transgressions. We cannot
understand how any age could have been interested in Patient Griselda."

Quite often our preferences or our dislikes may be the result of gross misunderstandings, our failure to see the object as in itself it really is. In our passionate allegiance to authenticity and in our disgust with the idea of society, we, that is, liberal intellectuals, pride ourselves for not liking literature which only purveys "sweetness and light." And we use that phrase ("sweetness and light") as a stick to beat Arnold and his humanism with. As a matter of fact, the phrase is not Arnold's but Swift's, and no man felt a greater disgust for mankind than did Swift. But Swift's disgust was caused by man's refusal to live in order and reason, to seek "sweetness and light." ¹⁴

There is a similar reason for our hostility to Dickens. The set of Dickens' works was once thought of as a "surrogate for the family hearth itself." And it is not surprising that Dickens should now be regarded vindictively by young men who have detached themselves from their families. But in fact no one judged more harshly and even bitterly of parents and the family than did Dickens. It is of course true that

¹³Trilling, "Mansfield Park," in OS, pp. 211-12.

¹⁴Trilling, "Introduction" to SMA, pp. 9-10.
Dickens also loved to represent "the fulfillment of all natural spontaneous emotions in the family." But our own modern masters like Lawrence, Kafka and Faulkner, those idols which we have installed in place of the Victorian ones, "give to the family a place in their vision of life which is no less fundamental than that of Dickens."\(^\text{15}\)

Quite often of course it may be self-deception or even conscious hypocrisy that characterizes our cultural-literary predilections. The old "visionary norm of order, peace, honour, and beauty" is now at a discount in our literature. Not that in our real lives we reject that norm. In fact, as "householders, housekeepers, and parents we maintain allegiance to it in practice, possibly even in diffident principle. But as readers, as participants in the conscious, formulating part of our life in society, we incline to the antagonistic position." And we "respond with discomfort and embarrassment" when Saul Bellow tries to question what has now become almost a literary convention--the negation of this old vision.\(^\text{16}\)

Or, to give another instance of our cultural duplicity, we set high store, in our literary consumption, by militancy

\(^{15}\)Trilling, "The Dickens of Our Day," in AGF, pp.43-44.

\(^{16}\)Trilling, S&A, p. 41.
and militant suffering. We prefer the tigers of wrath to the horses of instruction.

We do not, to be sure, live in the fashion of the beasts we admire in our literary lives, but we cherish them as representing something that we all seek. They are the emblems of the charisma . . . which is the hot, direct relationship with Godhead . . . upon which depend our notions of what I have called spiritual prestige. 17

The irony of the situation is obvious. Whereas men of an older time perhaps hypocritically asserted the traditional norm of honour, order and beauty, while privately doubting its validity and authority, we in our public, in our literary, in our "cultural" life, proclaim autonomy of the spirit, while living lives of conformity. The dissociation between the values we live by (if perhaps mechanically) and those we proclaim is deplorable.

There is a very interesting remark of Sainte-Beuve's which Arnold quotes in his "The Literary Influence of Academies":

"In France . . . the first consideration for us is not whether we are amused and pleased by a work of art or mind, nor is it whether we are touched by it. What we seek above all to learn is, whether we were right in being amused with it and in applauding it, and in being moved by it."

Arnold goes on to say that a Frenchman has a conscience in

matters of intellect by which he means that the Frenchman shows "deference to a standard higher than one's own, a . . . respectful recognition of a superior ideal."  

Now this is the prime consideration for Trilling as a critic of literature and as a critic of the criticism of literature. Are we--most often he includes himself in this process of cultural self-examination--justified in reacting to this writer or book in this way? What does our attitude say about ourselves? It is with some such questions that he opens his essay on William Dean Howells, significantly entitled "William Dean Howells and the Roots of Modern Taste," which might be taken as a representative example. Rather, the essay starts with a statement of Howells' present reputation: "the rumor of the Howells revival is surely false"; a recent omnibus volume of Howells "was piously reviewed but it was not bought"; Trilling's own attention to Howells in his lectures provoked the first anonymous letter he had ever received from a student--"it warned me that the lapse of taste shown by my excessive interest in a dull writer was causing a scandal in the cafeterias." 

But all this is only the preamble to the


19 Trilling, "William Dean Howells," in OE, pp. 77-78.
question and the statement:

How much is our present friendly indifference to him of his making and how much is it of ours? It is a question which cannot be fully answered at this time but only in some later generation that is as remote from our assumptions as from Howells’, yet it is worth attempting for what small self-knowledge the effort might bring. . . . in making our judgments of him we are involved in considerations of way of life, of quality of being.  

Then follows an account of the grounds of Howells’ lack of appeal. The interesting aspect of this account is that Trilling takes his cue, as he acknowledges, from three statements that Henry James made in his essay on Howells. There is an ambiguity of tone in these statements for James defines here not only the qualities of Howells’ work but by inversion his own. So that the job of getting to like Howells becomes for us readers, as it was for Trilling, a kind of critical challenge—for “in the degree that we admire James and defend his artistic practice, we are committed to resist Howells.”

One reason for the ground of our alienation from Howells is that he is "profligate" in his dealings with the familiar and the commonplace—he devotes the first six chapters of one of his novels to the hero’s search for an


21Ibid., pp. 86-87.
apartment. Most loathsome to us is Howells' conception of the middle class as the centre of reality. It is sufficient reason for us to look askance at a writer who thought that he, or any other novelist, could profitably treat of such matters as "the family budget, nagging wives, daughters who want to marry fools, and the difficulties of deciding whom to invite to dinner."\(^{22}\)

But our dislike of Howells on this score is only a symptom of our distaste for the conditioned. "Somewhere in our mental constitution is the demand for life as pure spirit."\(^{23}\) This is probably the reason for our reluctance to enter into the state of marriage, and is certainly the reason for our reluctance to become parents. Elsewhere Trilling recalls how among the American intellectuals of the thirties, children were considered "biological traps," not consistent with the good life.\(^{24}\) Even when we do live family lives, we do so with the knowledge that we are "'family-men,' by definition cut off from the true realities of the spirit."\(^{25}\)

\(^{22}\)Trilling, "William Dean Howells," in \textit{OS}, p. 92.

\(^{23}\)Ibid., p. 90.


Now the idea of the "conditioned," the insistence on the "conditioned" nature of our lives is a very important aspect of Trilling's thinking, especially in the essays of *The Opposing Self*. By "condition," as Paul Pickrel usefully explains, Trilling means "everything that makes it impossible for us to think whatever we please about ourselves and the world we live in":

He means all the ways the universe modifies and qualifies and limits our spirits, all the recalcitrance and perverseness and abrasiveness the universe exhibits when we try to deal with its ideologists. It is the law that springs into being whenever spirit touches matter. It is the voice beyond ideology.²⁶

So, in repudiating the conditioned life we only betray our submission to ideology. But acceptance of our conditioned nature is the only way to growth. Thus we may deplore Keats's relation to the "gross realities" but Keats achieved his "fellowship with essence" only by natural growth, by loving the earthy, the familiar and the familial.²⁷ Tolstoi too shows the awareness that "the spirit of man is always at the mercy of the actual and trivial," and this is a knowledge rarer than the knowledge


²⁷ Trilling, "The Poet as Hero," in *OS*, pp. 3-49.
of the unconditioned spirit of man. Our difficulty with Wordsworth is that he imagines the sentiment of being in association with the commonplace and the routine whereas to us the sentiment of being seems capable of realization only in terms of violence and martyrdom, the apocalyptic and the charismatic. But if we consider the true nature of tragedy we would see that its power depends on the truth we ascribe not to dying but to living and the common routine. We know, and Trilling knows, that Keats, Tolstoi, Howells and Orwell are not great heroes in the sense of being charismatic figures, but they are heroic in the sense they evidence the values of the conditioned spirit. Keats derived great pleasure from food and company. To Tolstoi the family is an actuality and "the affections truly exist." Orwell, in his *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, celebrates "fathers of families, those heroes of modern life."

The liberal intellectual's impatience with the conditioned is understandable. He wants to enlarge experience

---

31 Trilling, "George Orwell," in *OS*, p. 162.
by detaching it from the particular and the commonplace, the here and now, and involving it in "history, myth and the oneness of spirit." But he does not remember that there has always been a dialectic between the spirit and the conditioned—between, for instance, our search for spiritual roots and something so drab as a househunt. And when we reject the conditioned we lose one term of this dialectic.\(^{32}\) The greatness of nineteenth-century literature—all except one of the essays in The Opposing Self are about writers and books of that period—is that it kept a lively awareness of both terms of the dialectic. Ironically, in twentieth-century America, a sociologist like David Riesman has shown, what is markedly absent from the work of many novelists, the awareness "of the impingement of things upon spirit and of spirit upon things."\(^{33}\)

In his insistence on the conditioned nature of our lives, Trilling the liberal is once again exercising his function of critical disinterestedness: he almost becomes a conservative. Joseph Frank quotes Karl Mannheim to show that the distinction between liberal and conservative pivots on this feeling for the conditioned:

\(^{32}\)Trilling, "William Dean Howells," in OS, p. 93.

\(^{33}\)Trilling, "Two Notes on David Riesman," in AGF, p. 93.
The deepest driving force of the liberal ideas of the Enlightenment . . . lay in the fact that it appealed to the free will and kept alive the feeling of being indeterminate and unconditioned. . . . And if one wishes to formulate the central achievement of conservatism in a single sentence, it could be said that in conscious contrast to the liberal outlook, it gave positive emphasis to the notion of the determinateness of our outlook and behavior.34

For this conservative notion, Trilling found sustenance, Frank goes on to say, in Hegel's work. For in Hegel, "reality, the 'here and now' is no longer experienced as an 'evil' reality but as the embodiment of the highest value and meanings."35

Now this "determinateness of our outlook" imposed by the terms of our earthly existence must be distinguished from another kind of determinism, viz. cultural and political determinism. Against the latter, Trilling waged a relentless battle and the chief ground of his admiration for Freud and Orwell--to cite only two of his heroes--is that they resisted this latter determinism. Trilling notes with alarm that there seems to be no limit to the conditioning, nay even the killing, of our wills that culture and political ideology can effect on us whether by coercive methods or by seduction as witness our media and advertising

35 Ibid.
techniques. And the idea of biological conditioning is valuable in that it sets some limits to cultural control. That is why Freud's idea, that man is biologically conditioned, is so liberating; it suggests that there is a residue of human quality beyond the reach of cultural control, and that this residue of human quality, elemental as it may be, serves to bring culture itself under criticism and keeps it from being absolute.

It is possible to become somewhat impatient with Trilling's repetitive emphasis on "biological conditioning"; the idea is indeed ubiquitous in The Opposing Self. Joseph Frank rightly points out that if the weakness of the liberal imagination is that "it views the realm of the ultimate, the eternal, and the immitigable in the perspective of the will," the weakness of the conservative imagination lies "in imposing its sense of the ultimate conditioned nature of life on areas where the will may fruitfully intervene." The tragic sense of the conditioned, advocated in The Liberal Imagination, was certainly necessary as a defence against shortsighted optimism and utilitarianism. But the acceptance of the conditioned on the level of middle class values and the endowing of such acceptance with aesthetic transcendence can only result in "conformism.

and the debilitation of moral tension."37

But we must point out, in reply to Frank's misgivings, that "biological conditioning" is not the only defence that Trilling suggests against cultural-ideological encroachments, though there is a preoccupation with it in *The Opposing Self*. There is the supreme power of the critical intellect itself. We shall return to this later on in this chapter. We must also consider the possibility that the cessation of will Trilling speaks about is not a mere vegetative state though Lady Bertram comes dangerously close to that, that there might be other implications to it as well. These we shall discuss in the concluding chapter.

But let us now get back to the idea of cultural control and see how it can come from the most unexpected directions and take the most insidious forms. For this we must consider in some detail Trilling's ambivalent attitude to modern literature and the movement that is centred around it which Trilling has variously called adversary culture or secondary culture or the second environment. We saw in Chapter Three how modern literature in its characteristic mode arose out of the impulse towards authenticity, towards greater autonomy, and out of the self's standing quarrel with culture.

The force of modern literature was in proportion to the intensity of its adverse imagination of the general culture.

In a recent *Encounter* article, Irving Kristol distinguishes between two kinds of rebellion: (1) The romantic-rationalist rebellion of intellectuals which we call socialism and (2) the romantic-anti-rationalist rebellion which takes a cultural rather than a political form. It is the latter that Trilling had in mind when he referred to the adversary culture. Kristol observes the remarkable significance and appropriateness of the phrase "adversary culture": it was an adversary position in the full sense of the term "adversary." For what the movement attacked was not only the failure of society to realize its ideals; the target of attack was the ideals themselves. An adversary posture was taken not only towards the actuality of our society but its ideality as well. The hostile intentions of the adversary culture are also evident from the term *avant-garde*, a military term.38

38 Irving Kristol, "The Adversary Culture of Intellectuals," *Encounter*, 53, No. 4 (Oct. 1979), 5. Another proof of the repudiation of society by the adversary culture is its rejection of the concept of beauty. The modernist movements in art have as their professed function, not the creation of "beauty" but the revealing of "truth" about humanity. For "beauty" is defined by an aesthetic tradition which is a matter of public taste. And the modern artist rejects "the sovereignty of public taste, since truth can never be a matter of taste" (Ibid., p.10).
Now there is nothing by itself unhealthy in the artist's standing away from society and judging it or in identifying himself with a group of men who share his "indignant perception" of society. The great Romantic poets were one such group. As Trilling said in *The Liberal Imagination*, "the word coterie should not frighten us too much. . . . the smallness of the coterie does not limit the 'human' quality of the work."\(^{39}\) And the modern artist's questioning not of the forms of society but of its very essence is "an act of critical energy on the part of society itself . . . to identify in itself that which is but speciously good."\(^{40}\) Even the violence and sordidness of modern literature are primarily a means for the destruction of specious good and for the achievement of freedom for the individual spirit, for the attainment of "more life."\(^{41}\)

But if the word "coterie" should not frighten us too much, it should not "charm us too much" either.\(^{42}\) For one thing, the coterie has now swollen in size; the rebel is


\(^{40}\)Trilling, "The Leavis-Snow Controversy," in *BC*, p. 169.

\(^{41}\)Trilling, "The Fate of Pleasure," in *BC*, pp. 76-77.

now part of a large organization, with its own machinery and means of propaganda. The Davids, as Paul Pickrel observes, have become legion; they now make up an army of their own. Further, far from living in poverty and squalor, the modern artist lives in great material prosperity too. For instance, "the passion that contemporary wealth feels for contemporary painting" is amazing and "calls for at least a little irony."

Even this would not be a matter for alarm for civilizations are formed only by such reconciliations of power. But what is ironic and disturbing is that "around the adversary culture there has formed a class which has developed habitual responses to the stimuli of its environment." One of these responses is the sense of alienation. In an artist like Joyce the alienation is so intense and powerful because it is something earned. He moved "through the fullest realization of the human, the all-too-human, to that which transcends and denies the human." He was to conclude that "the walls and gates" of "the fair courts of life" enclosed nothing. But Joyce's genius is defined

---

44 Trilling, "Preface" to BC, p. xv.
by his having concluded this rather than taking it for
granted, as many of the generation that came after him have
found it possible to do" (emphasis added). Chesterton
once said that many people who speak of what they have been
through have never really been through anything. The falsi­
ties of social life, the sham of social arrangements are
simply taken for granted. We do not discover them. We
know them. There is, as it were, a kind of conditioning
into non-conformity. In our "alienated" age, the first
spoken words of "our moral infancy" were "'Take away that
bauble.'"

The irony consists in the fact that a movement for
autonomy has turned into a movement for conformity. The
question is no longer "Is it true to me?" but "Is it true
to us?" Just as the rationalist revolution (which is what
the Communist movement was supposed to be) had let loose
the most irrational forces—that irony is the point of
Koestler's title Darkness at Noon—so the movement for
autonomy had resulted in the loss of autonomy. For the
attitude of the adversary culture to its members can be
as heavy-handed as the relation of the general culture to

46 Trilling, "James Joyce in His Letters," in LD, p. 56.
its members. The adversary culture has become unionized; and there is no right of dissent within a union.

There is a further irony in the situation of the modernist writer. The writer is now required to be sincere not to nature or society but to his own inner life. But in so far as we have to analyse the work of art more and more to determine this, the inner life ceases to be inner. It is on public view. The artists themselves do not seem to mind this. Thus we have a paradoxical situation. Never has the inner life seemed so important as in our culture. Yet never has the inner life been lived so publicly. We have in fact set up public agencies for the service of the inner life. Of these agencies the most important and influential is literary criticism, now a great new profession.\textsuperscript{48}

Contemporary criticism, says Trilling, must in fact take a large share of responsibility for the situation with regard to the adversary culture. Trilling cites Saul Bellow's remark questioning the uncritical acceptance of the "alienation" concept and of the idea that "modern society is frightful, brutal, hostile to whatever is pure in the human spirit, a waste land and a horror." The doctrine has been accepted not only by the novelists, but by the critics as well. Criticism has evidently failed

to fulfil its Arnoldian function here; it has not examined the soundness of the ideas on which our literature has been based. In fact, the achievement of modern criticism has been, after all, "of an elementary sort." "It has taught us how to read certain books; it has not taught us how to engage them... it has instructed us in an intelligent passivity before the beneficent aggression of literature."\textsuperscript{49}

If that is what Trilling the critic feels about the adversary culture, Trilling the teacher experiences even greater discomfort about it and about teaching modern literature. But before we come to that, perhaps we could notice a few other observations of his on the content and quality of the literary education imparted to his students, and on the way he had tried to relate himself with his students. Quite often Trilling, as an older man, simply reveals a fascinated curiosity about the young people's preferences—as when he refers to his "yearly struggle" with undergraduates over Wordsworth's "The Character of the Happy Warrior" which seemed to them "too moral and 'manly'";\textsuperscript{50} or when he records his students' scandalized comment on his interest in Howells;\textsuperscript{51} or when he expresses his childlike

\textsuperscript{49}Trilling, "The Two Environments," in BC, pp.229-31.

\textsuperscript{50}Trilling, "Kipling," in LI, p. 134.

\textsuperscript{51}Trilling, "William Dean Howells," in OS, p. 78.
delight at a student's approving comment that George Orwell was a "virtuous man."\textsuperscript{52}

But behind such detached cultural observation there lies the tenderest solicitude for the right kind of sensibility and intellectual culture for his students. This is strongly borne out by his lecture "English Literature and American Education" which was later published in The Sewanee Review. He is there concerned primarily to identify the circumstances of the diminution and eventual disappearance of English literature from the high school and college curriculum in America. But this inevitably leads to the calculation of the loss involved and the wish, however muted, to reverse the trend. For the value of English literature, to American students, lies in the report it brings of the other culture:

Nothing is of greater value in the training of the mind than the exercise of the ability to imagine life as it was lived in distant times and distant places. How it was done in that other place, how it was said in that other time, how it was felt there and then—this is not merely the historical imagination, it is one of the faculties of developed mind in general.\textsuperscript{53}

Besides, English literature can supply a number of important

\textsuperscript{52}Trilling, "George Orwell," in OS, p. 154.

wants that are felt by readers of American literature; the latter for instance has no Chaucer, no Wyatt, no seventeenth century.  

All of which leads Trilling to the conclusion, which he courageously articulates, that "American literature systematically considered is not the matter that should be the central matter of instruction in literature in our colleges."  

But Trilling has even more serious misgivings about the teaching of all modern literature—American or European. The first cause for his discomfort is personal. His relationship with modern literature has been highly personal as it should be for any reader of modern literature. For "no literature has ever been so shockingly personal as that of our time—it asks every question that is forbidden in polite society. It asks us if we are content with our marriages, with our family lives, with our professional lives, with our friends." In teaching such a literature, one cannot rest content with discoursing on technicalities. One must say whether a particular work is true or not, and say why it is true or not true. For this one must bear personal testimony. And the teacher can do all this only at very great cost to his privacy. It is relatively easy to discuss such matters

*Ibid., p. 381.
in the "anonymity of print" or with friends of equal age and especial intimacy, but "to speak of them in one's own voice to an audience which each year grows younger as one grows older—that is not easy, and probably it is not decent."  

And then, apart from personal considerations, there was the fear that the subject being taught may be "betrayed by the pedagogy of the subject," the fear that the experience embodied in modern literature may, when it is subjected to the rigorous abstracting procedures of the academy, lose much of its personal immediacy for us and become "part of an accredited societal activity." And this was precisely what happened when Trilling did finally start teaching the subject. He found his students only too ready to engage in "the socialization of the anti-social, or the acculturation of the anti-cultural or the

56 Trilling, "On the Teaching of Modern Literature," in BC, pp. 8-10. Behind Trilling's discomfort at having to teach this literature we cannot help sensing an embarrassment at the literature itself, the embarrassment that an urban intellectual is likely to feel at all this "laying bare." In an essay of personal reminiscence, Phillip Lopate recalls how Trilling rather naively asked in a classroom discussion once: "Don't you think there is something disgusting in all this plumbing into each other's souls? What is left if everything is known? Wouldn't you like to hold something off, for a rainy day?" (Phillip Lopate, "Remembering Lionel Trilling," American Review, No. 25 (Oct. 1976), pp. 155-56).

legitimization of the subversive." The students, especially the brighter ones, simply moved "through the terrors and mysteries of modern literature like so many Parsifals, asking no questions at the behest of wonder and fear."58

But Trilling's most powerful objection to the teaching of modern literature arises from the circumstance that there has grown out of this literature, or around it, a cultural environment. Now the value of any education, especially a literary education, consists in placing the student in an intellectual position from which he can regard and judge the dominant environment around him. Modern literature does indeed accomplish this task—it does expose to him the falsities of the social reality, the fraud that lies behind every ideology—but, in its turn, pushes him into another environment. And this second environment shows all the essential characteristics of the first: "firm presuppositions, received ideas, approved attitudes, and a system of rewards and punishments."59 To become part of this second environment is then simply to replace one's conservative pieties by progressive pieties. The chief good of a literary education should be to carry the self


beyond the culture, to induce the self "to detach itself" from its bondage to "the idols of the Marketplace, the Tribe, the Theatre, and even of the Cave." But this principle has been inverted, and the new literary education seems simply to "set up the old idols in new forms of its own contrivance."\(^60\)

And so both as critic and teacher Trilling is led to the revolutionary view, which is the ultimate proof of his disinterestedness, that "art does not always tell the truth and does not always point out the right way, that it can even generate falsehood and habituate us to it."\(^61\)

And Trilling bolsters this heresy with a quotation from Keats: "Poetry is not so fine a thing as philosophy--for the same reason that an eagle is not so fine a thing as a truth."\(^62\)

But if literature fail us in protecting our selfhood, what is left, what is the last bastion of our individual

\(^60\)Trilling, "The Two Environments," in BC, p. 232.


autonomy? Trilling answers: it is the critical intellect. It is mind that should enable us to stand beyond culture, beyond any culture, general or adversary, primary or secondary. When distinguished men like C.P. Snow and F.R. Leavis display more prejudice than understanding in their controversy, we must attribute their stances to their commitment to certain cultural life-styles rather than truth:

It is at such a moment that our dispirited minds yearn to find comfort and courage in the idea of mind, that faculty whose ancient potency our commitment to the idea of culture denies. To us today, mind must inevitably seem a poor gray thing, for it always sought to detach itself from the passions (but not from the emotions, Spinoza said, and explained the difference) and from the conditions of time and place. Yet it is salutary for us to contemplate it, whatever its grayness, because of the bright belief that was once attached to it, that it was the faculty which belonged not to professions, or to social classes, or to cultural groups, but to man, and that it was possible for men, and becoming to them, to learn its proper use, for it was the means by which they could communicate with each other. 63

We see then in Trilling's engagement with literature and literary culture a concern with and for culture in the Arnoldian sense: a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that has been known and thought. It would therefore only be appropriate to conclude with Arnold's words, words that express his, and for us:

Trilling's deepest anxiety:

Only it must be real thought and real beauty; real sweetness and real light. Plenty of people will try to give the masses, as they call them, an intellectual food prepared and adapted in the way they think proper for the actual condition of the masses. The ordinary popular literature is an example of this way of working on the masses. . . . but culture works differently. It does not try to teach down to the level of inferior classes; it does not try to win them for this or that sect of its own, with ready-made judgments and watchwords. It seeks to do away with classes; to make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere; to make all men live in an atmosphere of sweetness and light, where they may use ideas, as it uses them itself, freely, nourished and not bound by them. 64

64 Arnold, Culture and Anarchy, pp. 69-70.