Laurence Lerner, in the course of his review of *Beyond Culture*, draws a useful distinction between two kinds of abilities which are central to the job of a critic. The first of these Lerner calls "verbal responsiveness." This is the ability to read a poem or a novel and "to see—and show—what makes it tick, where the dead wood lies and what it died of." This ability is close to the ability to create literature itself. So the critic who shows this ability may himself be a creator. Lerner cites Coleridge as the forefather of this kind of sensitivity in English. The other talent is "social responsiveness," the ability "to relate the spiritual needs of the time to the technical possibilities of the arts, to see what it is in our society that feeds one artistic movement more than another, and what the artistic possibilities are that one social tendency has strangled when another desperately needs them." This sensitivity is connected less with creative writing than with some kinds of history and sociology. The critic who displays this second responsiveness may lack the first talent.
The great forefather of this second class, Lerner says, is Matthew Arnold.¹

The distinction thus drawn, there should be no hesitation in assigning Lionel Trilling, as Lerner does, to the second category. For Trilling's concern with literature has been unabashedly political if by politics we mean a study of man and society, or man in society or out of it, the individual in culture or the individual beyond it. It follows from this that what engages Trilling's attention in works of literature is their content—the formulations they make directly or implicitly about us and our life in society—and not matters of technique. The resemblance to Arnold is quite clear. But when we thus link Trilling's name with Arnold's we should also go a step further and say that to both literature is not only a social and political agent, it is ultimately moral in the sense of being concerned with ways of feeling and acting.

It is also not surprising that Trilling's interest lay chiefly in nineteenth-century works and authors. He once described himself as a nineteenth-century person having in mind his belief in the efficacy of the will.² The

¹Laurence Lerner, Rev. of Beyond Culture, London Magazine, 6 (July 1966), 108.

²Robert Langbaum ("The Importance of The Liberal
nineteenth century was also the period when the problem of the self and society—Trilling's unceasing preoccupation—found its first and most intense formulation. It is also the period that immediately followed the Romantic Revolution and the French Revolution, the two events that have most shaped our own movements in art and politics in the twentieth century. So when Trilling writes on nineteenth-century works, it is, we may say, out of solicitude for the twentieth century.

The next general observation we can make about Trilling's choice of works for critical discussion is that most of them are works of fiction. In fact, if we leave out of account The Experience of Literature (and the Oxford) anthologies, he has only two essays—those on Keats and Wordsworth in The Opposing Self collection—dealing with poets in full and only one—on "The Immortality Ode" in The Liberal Imagination—with an individual poem.  

Imagination," Salmagundi, No. 41 (Spring 1978), p.65) recalls this remark which Trilling made about himself in a lecture at the University of Virginia shortly before his death.

Little Dorrit for example is about "society in relation to the individual human will," society as the prison in which the individual will is confined (Trilling, "Little Dorrit," in OS, pp. 51-53).

The essay on Kipling in The Liberal Imagination and that on Robert Graves in A Gathering of Fugitives discuss also the novels of those two writers.
The reasons for Trilling's preference for the novel form are not hard to find. We discussed (in Chapter Two) the importance Trilling attaches to the right perception of reality. We also saw how reality for Trilling is the social reality, the actions and interactions of men. As R.W.B. Lewis points out, Trilling urges critic and writer alike to centre their attentions on the point of intersection between literature and society. Lewis quotes from Horace—"I should instruct the creative artist to look long at the pattern of life and customs, and thence to draw living expressions"—and says that Trilling is like Horace in his method, "a method which, needless to say, involves him with the novel, the narrative portrait of society, rather than the lyric."5

Secondly, it has been truly said that the modern consciousness, the authentic consciousness "finds itself through fiction and is to that extent identical with it." In fact, we may go a step further and say with John Bayley that "authenticity could consist in the one assertion, 'I am the hero of a novel and therefore authentic.'"6


The third reason for Trilling's preoccupation with fiction has to do with the close connexion he posits between literature and ideas. And, as he says in "Art and Fortune," of all literary forms it is the novel which deals most explicitly with ideas. And Trilling claims for the novel the right of dealing with ideas not by means of "objective correlatives" but directly "as it deals with people or terrain or social setting." It is the novel, more than any other literary form, that deals with statements and formulations about man in society. The novel's privilege is also its duty. In an ideological age like ours when "we eat by reason, copulate by statistics, rear children by rule," the novel's function is to examine ideas and their consequences, and to attach ideas to their appropriate actuality. Once again we are led back to Trilling's conviction that "the novel passionately concerns itself with reality, with appearance and reality."7

The novel has thus a moral function, being what D.H. Lawrence called "the book of life."8 Here again it is the nineteenth century that has thrown the challenge


to the twentieth:

For what so animated the novel of the nineteenth century was the passionate—the "revolutionary"—interest in what man should be. It was, that is, a moral interest, and the world had the sense of a future moral revolution.  

But perhaps the modern novel, "with its devices for investigating the quality of character," is even more highly fitted for this job of moral realism:

The novelist goes where the law cannot go; he tells the truth where the formulations of even the subllest ethical theorist cannot. He turns the moral values inside out to question the worth of the deed by looking not at its actual outcome but at its tone and style. He is subversive of dominant morality and under his influence we learn to praise what dominant morality condemns; he reminds us that benevolence may be aggression, that the highest idealism may corrupt. 

But whether it is poetry, fiction or drama that he writes on, we may say that Trilling's choice of subjects is governed by his preference for certain themes, by considerations of what his age needs. Laurence Lerner points out that Trilling's "nose for what matters in his


time seems . . . quite as good as Arnold's."¹¹ Trilling's books on Arnold and E.M. Forster were written in the face of the contemporary American indifference to these writers but out of the conviction that the work of these true liberals had an intense relevance to a society that professed to be liberal.¹² The subjects of the essays collected in *The Liberal Imagination* were again useful in dislodging several misconceptions, entertained by the reading public, about the nature of reality, history and literature itself. The recurrent motif of all the works and authors discussed in *The Opposing Self* is the conditioned nature of our lives. The writers who form the subject of *Beyond Culture* have been chosen for the warning they issue (directly or indirectly) against the unhealthy development (viz. the adversary culture) of a healthy phenomenon (viz. revolt against society).

A similar preference for certain themes seems to have governed even the selection of the works anthologized in *The Experience of Literature* volumes. In the *Drama* volume for example there are no specimens from the


¹²Trilling mentions Edmund Wilson's kind personal enquiry about how his (Trilling's) book on Arnold was getting on. The enquiry had a "liberating effect" on Trilling, coming as it did at a time when nobody seemed to want a book on Arnold (See "Edmund Wilson," in *Age*, p. 51).
eighteenth century, evidently for the reason that there is no psychological or depth-study of either human nature or human society in that drama. A large number of the pieces in this and the Fiction volume deal, in some way or other, with the theme of death. It is as though Trilling could never forget Forster's aphorism: "Death kills a man, but the idea of death saves him." We shall return to this matter in Chapter Nine but we may recall here our observation in Chapter Two that a proper attitude to death was part of the education that, in Trilling's opinion, American liberals needed.

There are other interests as well. Selfhood, will and identity are the issues in some of the selections ("Bartleby the Scrivener," "The Death of Ivan Ilych," "The Dead," "The Hunter Gracchus," "The Road from Colonus"). The secret liberal wish to stay the march of history is symbolized in Dr. Cornelius' desire to prevent the "early sorrow" in his child's life (Mann's "Disorder and Early Sorrow"). A concern with reality marks the selections from Ibsen (The Wild Duck) and Pirandello (Six Characters In Search of an Author). In the latter there

13Oedipus Rex, King Lear, Purgatory (by Yeats), "Bartleby the Scrivener," "The Death of Ivan Ilych," "Enemies" (by Chekhov), "The Pupil" (by Henry James), "The Dead" (by Joyce), "The Hunter Gracchus" (by Kafka) and "The Road from Colonus" (by Forster).
is a serious pun on theatrical reality and our ordinary reality. In the former, what engages Trilling's attention is the moral realism with which the concern for reality is expressed—the perception that reality and truth are not always to be sought, that "it is wicked for one person to seek to impose upon another a greater amount of reality than can comfortably be borne."\textsuperscript{14} "The Grand Inquisitor," the selection from Dostoevski, can be called a piece of fiction only on the ground that it is an extract from \textit{The Brothers Karamazov}. Trilling has chosen it because in it Dostoevski "with extreme boldness and simplicity" brings into confrontation the two great concepts that tease the modern mind, freedom on the one hand, happiness and security on the other. Once again the relevance to liberal politics is quite clear. The historical prescience that Dostoevski shows—in visualizing the twentieth-century totalitarian state—actually "derives from Dostoevski's
d\textsuperscript{14}Trilling, "The Wild Duck," in \textit{Prefaces}, p. 22. This "message" is all the more remarkable, says Trilling, coming as it does from a writer who in all his other works passionately articulated the view that "falsehood, whether in the form of social lies and hypocrisy or of self-deception, weakens the fabric of life and deprives human kind of its dignity" (Ibid., p. 23). Perhaps we should rather put the matter this way: that the dialectical opposition in the play is not so much between truth and falsehood as between the truth that we can digest and the truth that we cannot. As the Indian scriptures say, what is a moral ideal for one is not so for a more ignorant person. This was held true especially in social organization. If a reality is something that is split into so many parts, there is a limit to which one person can integrate the bits.
willingness to take seriously the social and political speculations which were current in the intellectual life of his day." Here, if anywhere, is the novelist exercising his privilege and performing his duty—viz. examining our ideas and ideologies in all their reality and capacity for damage.

Quite often discussion of a work or some aspect of it leads Trilling to literary-cultural generalizations about art, artists and their relation to their public. In the "Commentary" on Pope's "An Essay on Man" Trilling quotes those passages from "An Essay on Criticism" in which Pope brilliantly demonstrates the variety and the onomatopoetic potential of the heroic couplet. And Trilling adds:

This famous display of virtuosity will suggest how large a part in Pope's art was played by the poet's sense that he was a performer, that it was his purpose to give pleasure to an audience whose right to judge his performance depended only upon a proper training of its faculty of judgment, its taste.


16 We must however note that Trilling exercises his function of critical disinterestedness and points out that though Dostoevski, like his Devil-Inquisitor, offers only extreme courses, "humanity is not in reality confronted with alternatives so unmodified and . . . so simple in their absoluteness" (Ibid., p. 83).

A contrasting view of the relation between the artist and his public is provided in Coleridge's Preface to "Kubla Khan."\(^\text{18}\) (We may note in passing the curious but significant fact that most of the "Commentary" on "Kubla Khan" is a discussion of Coleridge's Preface to the poem rather than the poem itself. It is also to be noted that Trilling finds in the Preface a kind of confirmation of his own views on the creative process. Incidentally, we may contrast Trilling's interest in the creative process with the New Critics' comparative indifference to it. Even T.S. Eliot just approaches the matter in his "Three Voices of Poetry" where, however, he concludes that even the poet does not know what the poem is going to be like until he sees the poem. Herbert Read and Trilling, by reason of their awareness of the power of the subconscious and the unconscious, are perhaps the only two modern critics who evince serious interest in the creative process.)

Now Coleridge's Preface to "Kubla Khan" constitutes "a radical denial of the character of the poet that had prevailed in the eighteenth century." It "quite negates the idea of the poet as performer and of the poem as an artistic commodity offered to the audience for its approval." In fact, "Kubla Khan" was so little a performance
that it was not even finished. And Trilling goes on to make another generalization, this time about this kind of art and artist. "Kubla Khan" "came into being as if by its own necessity and by its own will—it is a fact in nature as much as in art, a psychological fact as much as a poetic fact." The circumstances of this poem's composition also confirm Freud's view—though Trilling does not mention Freud here, it is clear he has Freud's opinion in mind—that "it would seem . . . that the mind quite naturally makes poems, as it makes dreams, without intention, without effort, without thought, without revision or awareness of the rules of literature." Coleridge's Preface suggests yet another thing: how this poem is to be responded to. It suggests that the reader is free to respond to the poem in terms of the poem itself. It suggests that the poem need have no relation to us "except as we elect to have a relation to it, by finding interest and pleasure in it." It need not even be, in any usual definition of the word, a communication.19

19 Ibid., pp. 228-30. Trilling records, without comment, these observations suggested by Coleridge's Preface. But Trilling's general attitude towards the whole tendency of the movement in authenticity would suggest approval on his part. It is interesting to speculate what Arnold would have said about a poetry that makes no effort and lays no claim to being a communication. To approve of such a poetry, he would perhaps have said, is to open the floodgates of endless subjectivism. It is also significant that Arnold wrote hardly anything about Coleridge's poetry.
We may now go on to consider some of the methods Trilling employs while discussing particular works. A favourite method of his, as we noticed in Chapters One and Six, is to start with an account of reader-critic responses. It is significant that Trilling often adopts this method of approach even in The Experience of Literature volumes where the only end in view is "to make it more likely that the act of reading will be an experience . . . having in mind what the word implies of an activity of consciousness and response." But this attention to the critical history of the work in question leads back to the work and some essential aspect of it.

To take just one example, the "Commentary" on Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" starts with a mention of its omission from Palgrave's Golden Treasury. Now Trilling proceeds to seek the reasons for the omission. He finds the reason not in Marvell's "frank naturalism"--the intentions of the lover are not "honourable," it is not marriage that he proposes--but in the "double-mindedness and irony" that the poem shows--its "powerful union of pathos and humor"--for Victorian poetry cherished "a direct singleness of emotion." Trilling proceeds to show that it is this irony "at once gay and

20 Trilling, "Introduction" to Prefaces, p. x.
bitter" that provides the proper perspective to the poem.\textsuperscript{21}
We see how a consideration of Victorian critical taste leads back to the "this-ness" of the poem itself.

There are of course instances, though these are few and occasional, of Trilling's interpreting a poem "in its own terms." The truth of course is that few poems permit such an exclusive strategy. Robert Frost's "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep" provides Trilling with one such opportunity. Even here it is remarkable that Trilling talks about the whole, the overall effect, before he discusses the parts. He starts by remarking that the power and charm of the poem lie in the discrepancy between its tone and ostensible subject on the one hand and its actual subject on the other. The tone is "minimal, flat, even . . . fatigued." The ostensible subject is "an observation of the behavior of people at the seashore." This is not of great consequence "and might even be thought rather trifling." The actual subject however is "the response of mankind to the empty immensity of the universe."\textsuperscript{22}

Trilling proceeds to account for the power of this

\textsuperscript{21}Trilling, "To His Coy Mistress," in Prefaces, pp. 201-204.

\textsuperscript{22}Trilling, "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep," in Prefaces, p. 284.
discrepancy by commenting on the repetition of the word "look." The word is used five times in this short poem. Every time it gains in intensity until its full significance is brought out in the last two lines when it suddenly yields place to the word "watch":

They cannot look out far
They cannot look in deep.
But when was that ever a bar
To any watch they keep?

Trilling comments:

The minimal word is replaced, and explained, by a phrase of great dignity and richness of meaning. It implies a strong intention, and the activity of the mind as well as of the eye. And of the activity of the heart as well as of the mind.\(^\text{23}\)

The power of the poem also derives, Trilling observes, from the strange effectiveness of the word "people." The effect is strange and remarkable because "we are often told that poetry deals with the particular and the concrete, that this is its very essence." "People," the most general and abstract word possible, has yet here a strange pathos:

Is it because its generality proposes to us the ultimate generality of mankind; all people, all over the world, at all times ("When was that ever a bar . . .?") For some readers, it will have a reminiscence of the effect of naive simplicity with which the word is used in the Bible, as, for example, "Where there is no vision, the people perish."

\(^{23}\)Trilling, "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep," in Prefaces, pp. 284–85.
There is also an imputation of humility in the use of this word. "The people" all "look at the sea" not at the behest of any intellectual curiosity but at the behest of something instinctual or innate: "there is something dumb, something of the animal, in the accord with which they turn their gaze in one direction and keep it there." And this imputation of an animal-like humility "is anything but contemptuous; on the contrary it is tender." 24

Trilling is thus capable of responding to the words on the page with the utmost sensitivity. He can, for instance, feel, and convey, the full impact of the word "spirit" in "Ode to the West Wind." The Ode, he says, is "based on the primitive identification of spirit and wind, for the word spirit comes from the Latin spiritus, meaning breath, which in turn comes from spirare meaning 'to blow.' Shelley is entirely literal in making such an identification. Dispirited, he asks again to be inspired, to have the breath of life blown into him." 25

He can perceive the power of words to create a setting, to evoke an atmosphere, or many atmospheres at the same time. He sees how in that famous scene in "The

24 Ibid., pp. 286-87.

Eve of St Agnes,"

the whole paraphernalia of luxurious felicity, the invoked warmth of the south, the bland and delicate food, the privacy of the bed, and the voluptuousness of the sexual encounter, are made to glow into an island of bliss with the ultimate dramatic purpose of making fully apparent the cold surrounding darkness; it is the moment of life in the infinitude of not-being.26

Trilling can also, where he feels it necessary, make excursions into stylistics. He can study style as an exploitation of both norm and deviation. He points out the significance of the orthographic deviation in Blake's title "Tyger, Tyger." Even in Blake's time the modern spelling was the one commonly used. Blake's spelling has the effect of making the animal which the word denotes seem more remarkable—"a Tyger is surely more interesting than tiger":

It startles our habitual expectations, it jolts our settled imagination of the beast and prepares us to see it as we never saw it before, as Blake saw it. Then, too, the y is a stronger, as it is a larger letter than i; it suggests a longer-held sound and therefore supports the idea of an animal even fiercer than the tiger.27


27 Trilling, "Tyger! Tyger!" in Prefaces, pp. 215-16. Trilling reinforces this remark by providing an interesting contrast. "Conversely, the little boy in A.A. Milne's stories calls one of his animal friends Tigger, and by the shortening of the i wipes out all possibility of the creature's being dangerous" (Ibid.).
Style as linguistic innovation is the characteristic feature of E.E. Cummings' poems and it is interesting to observe that one of his poems finds place in The Experience of Literature: Poetry volume. We shall return to Trilling's "Commentary" on this poem presently.

Matters like prosody, tone and voice also receive attention sometimes. For instance, while acknowledging the "difficulty" of The Waste Land, Trilling observes that acquaintance with this poem is best begun with a response to its "music," the many "voices" through which the poem speaks. This is the element of the poem which can and should be apprehended first. In Auden's commemorative poem on Freud, the large claims made for the intention of Freud's science are qualified by the dry tone which is partly the effect of a plain diction and largely the effect of the stanzaic form.

Wherever necessary, Trilling also makes use of concepts


29 Trilling, "In Memory of Sigmund Freud," in Prefaces, pp. 294–95. Trilling observes that the stanzaic form has been modelled on the so-called Alcaic strophe of Greek and Latin poetry. But unlike the Alcaic strophe, "Auden's form has no set metrical pattern within the fixed number of syllables for each line . . . the rhythm of each line is controlled and made more or less homogeneous with that of its matching lines by the fixed number of syllables. One has the sense of prose that is always at the point of becoming metrical, . . . and always being prevented" (Ibid.)
like "point of view." He sees the shifting operation of point of view in Henry James's story "The Pupil" (where Pemberton who all along had been "the person through whose eyes we observe events," becomes, towards the end, "a moral agent"),\(^\text{30}\) and in Joyce's "The Dead" (in which the author, so far detached, seems, towards the close, to bring his own emotion in "active accord" with Gabriel Conroy's).\(^\text{31}\) In the "Commentary" on this latter story, again, Trilling also detects the device of paradox employed in the story--the people who seem to be alive are actually "the dead."\(^\text{32}\) But he sees and states the paradox quite simply, as though it were there for any reader to see. That is to say, he doesn't "arrive" at the paradox in the manner of a Cleanth Brooks.

One gets the feeling, however, that all this--verbal analysis, fictional poetics, tension, paradox, tone, voice, etc.--are but secondary, if even that, to both Trilling's critical intention and strategy. Even when he has recourse to these devices/concepts, he does not attach as much importance to these technical aspects and relate them

\(^{30}\) Trilling, "The Pupil," in Prefaces, pp. 105-106.

\(^{31}\) Trilling, "The Dead," in Prefaces, pp. 116-17.

\(^{32}\) Ibid., pp. 112-13.
organically to the experience as a stylistician or a formalist of the type of Cleanth Brooks might do, though his intuitive perception of the whole leads him to the same interpretation. We mentioned earlier how Trilling takes note of E.E. Cummings' adventure among linguistic resources. Trilling also remarks how Cummings' themes in the poem—the values of sincerity, integrity, unselfishness, etc.—are themselves commonplace enough but how they shed their commonplaceness because of the freshness of the language.

Yet the novelty of Cummings' language cannot claim all the credit for the poem's engagingness which in some part comes from the poet's conception of the best kind of goodness, that which is spontaneous, natural, and arises from and moves toward joy.33

But then, we ask, is it not possible that the unconventional, fresh language is organically related to the spontaneous virtues that the "father" shows? Trilling interprets the theme aright, he notes the linguistic features, but he sees no organic connexion between the two. It is interesting to speculate what a structuralist critic or even a stylistician would have made of the poem.

The truth of the matter—and Trilling confesses as

much on at least one occasion—is that it just "goes against his grain" to regard literary works, whether they be poems, plays or novels, as mere "verbal structures." You do not describe a howitzer or a quinquerime by its structure, without estimating how much damage it can do. Verbal analysis does little justice to, for example, the adversary, in fact the subversive, intention of modern literature. For understanding that, you get at the impact of the ideas that generate the work and are generated by it. We may call this an ideological or an intuitive approach or what we will, but the fact is that Trilling has little patience, as had Arnold, with matters of technique, verbal patterning, etc. We find in his criticism an Arnoldian concentration on the ideas or the ideational content. And he always seeks to invest these ideas with the dignity of general truths or statements about our lives and institutions. The passage, already cited, on the two atmospheres evoked by Keats's use of language in "The Eve of St Agnes" is followed by the following remark: "Keats's capacity for pleasure implies his capacity for the apprehension of tragic reality."  


\[35\] Trilling, "The Poet as Hero," in OS, p. 18.
Geoffrey Hartman suggests another reason for Trilling's avoidance of dealing with literary works as purely verbal structures. This, Hartman says, is

not simply because he stands in the tradition of moral rather than formalistic criticism but also because he suspects the formalists of masking their will, of bending the text to their moral or ideological views without acknowledging this.\(^\text{36}\)

It also follows that the formalists ignore the will and the intentionality of the writer and often project their own intentions in their interpretation. This may be called the New Subjectivism.

Trilling's preference, for regarding poems, plays and novels as formulations of literary ideas rather than as verbal artifacts, expresses itself most strongly when he talks about methods of studying modern literature, especially fiction. David Lodge, in his *Language of Fiction*, examines the possibility and desirability of applying the strategies of textural analysis (which have been so successfully employed for interpreting poetry, especially certain kinds of it), to works of fiction. For this purpose Lodge distinguishes between the contemporary and the modern. Lodge concludes that "modern" works can be usefully subjected

\(^{36}\text{Geoffrey H. Hartman, "The Fate of Reading," in The Fate of Reading, pp. 256-57.}\)
to close verbal analysis. Trilling, on the other hand, would appear to doubt the usefulness of such analysis for any kind of novels. In fact Trilling goes a step further and opposes the notion that the language of fiction should be like the language of poetry:

Mr Eliot praises the language of Nightwood for having so much affinity with poetry. This is not a virtue, and I believe that it will not be mistaken for a virtue by any novel of the future which will interest us.

And Trilling proceeds to say that the creation of a "natural prose," "straightforward . . . rapid, masculine, and committed to events" should be "one of the conscious intentions of any novelist." And he also expresses the hope that "the novelist of the next decades will not occupy himself with questions of form";

The notions of form which are at present current among even those who are highly trained in literature—let alone among the semi-literary who are always very strict about enforcing the advanced ideas of forty years ago—are all too simple and seem to come down to nothing more than the form of the sonata, the return on the circle with appropriate repetitions of theme. For the modern highly trained literary sensibility, form suggests completeness and the ends tucked in; resolution is seen only as all contradictions equated, and although form thus understood has its manifest charm, it will not adequately serve the modern experience. A story, like the natural course of

an emotion, has its own form, and I take it as the sign of our inadequate trust of the story and of our exaggerated interest in sensibility that we have begun to insist on the precise ordering of the novel.

And at this point Trilling makes the statement which we discussed in Chapter Four: "Then I venture the prediction that the novel of the next decades will deal in a very explicit way with ideas."\textsuperscript{38}

There are, however, certain other approaches that are more consistent with Trilling's assumptions about the origin and appeal of literature. David Daiches, while reviewing Trilling's \textit{E.M. Forster}, distinguished between two critical tasks, the task of \textit{demonstrating} the work under discussion and that of providing for the work "a context that makes possible fruitful and suggestive \textit{comparison}." Daiches adds that if he had to choose between the two he would choose the latter. "For literature, like life, is a series of successes and failures, and of many mixtures of both; it is a series of struggles to achieve significance, each of which can only be properly assessed and interpreted if we see it beside others."\textsuperscript{39} Trilling continually tries to provide each work and author with such a context. His


\textsuperscript{39}David Daiches, "Lionel Trilling: \textit{E.M. Forster}," \textit{Accent}, 4 (Autumn 1943), 61.
study of Matthew Arnold is a fine example of his method of comparative criticism, placing Arnold, as it does, in the stream of world thought and endowing him with modern significance. Howard Foster Lowry who felt that the "wealth of comparison" was somewhat overdone, still had to admit that "there is a continual play of mind which draws out the full implications of Arnold's position, even when his method or his conclusions are not held sound."\(^4\)

Trilling is of course quite aware that the charge of excess can be brought against him in this respect. After connecting Scott Fitzgerald with a number of other writers—Shakespeare, Dickens, Balzac, Goethe, Yeats, Stendhal—Trilling admits that some people may feel that this involvement of Fitzgerald with "a great many great names" might do Fitzgerald no service, "the disproportion being so large." But the disproportion will not seem so large to those who remember that Fitzgerald, for all his "early public legend of heedlessness," put himself "in the line of greatness," that he judged himself in a large way.\(^4\)

We do feel the disproportion sometimes, however, though we do not feel it in the case of Scott Fitzgerald.\(^4\)


points out how in Trilling's essay on Flaubert (in *The Opposing Self*) we bump against Rabelais, Sterne, D.H. Lawrence, Joyce, Nietzsche, Diderot, Swift, Cervantes, Molière, Pope, Goethe, Defoe, Dickens, Conan Doyle, Mark Twain, Plato, Yeats, Robert Graves, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Descartes, Spinoza. An equally long list could be made from the essay on William Dean Howells. While we may not go so far with Harvey as to call these an "unfunctional barrage of culture references"—they can be quite unfunctional especially if we haven't read them—we do feel disposed, perhaps out of the irritation born of our lack of acquaintance with these many names, to conclude, at least in these two cases, that "they crumble under the weight of significance imposed on them." But it would be unfair to charge Trilling with simply letting off scholarly fireworks. Phillip Lopate, in a personal reminiscence, recalls that as a teacher Trilling had "no desire to dazzle with erudite references." "He left us with the feeling that it was not necessary to know many books but to love a few deeply and all one's life."  

Trilling also makes a judicious and often sophisticated...  


use of biography. We saw in Chapter One how he mixes biography, sociology and comparative criticism to arrive at a just and firm estimate of Sherwood Anderson's work. Everywhere he shows a willingness to use biographical facts for literary purposes. For instance, there is, he says, while discussing The Bostonians, a biographical circumstance the awareness of which "is likely to make for a warmer understanding of the book." During 1881, the year of Henry James's first visit to America after settling in England, his mother died. "It was the perfect mother's life—the life of a perfect wife," James said. Within a few months his father too died. He had had what Basil Ransom, the hero of The Bostonians, calls "the masculine power, 'the ability to dare and endure, to know and yet not to fear reality.'" It was after the end of the parental family that

Henry James wrote out the scenario of The Bostonians, which is a story of the parental house divided against itself, of the keystone falling from the arch, of the sacred mothers refusing their commission and the sacred fathers endangered.  

Trilling doesn't scruple to discuss the intention of the artist though he never accepts it as the only means of getting at the meaning of the work. We may cite his

"Commentary" on Brecht's *Galileo* as an instance of the highly intelligent use he can make of the author's intention. Why did Brecht represent Galileo "as having dishonored himself in not choosing death in preference to the abjuration of his beliefs"? This manipulation of history—Galileo was actually held in contempt neither by fellow-scientists nor by the people for having abjured his views under pressure from the Inquisition—cannot be justified in terms of Brecht's theory of the stage or of his Marxist creed. It is all the more surprising that Brecht here condemns Galileo for doing something which he himself had not only advocated but had actually done. One possible explanation for Brecht's reversal of his habitual mode of judgment is that he had changed his own view of conduct. But this is a personal interpretation and it "can have but a minor part in our understanding of the moral doctrine of the play." Brecht himself explained this change by his response to the explosion of the atomic bomb, "which induced him to take a more rigorous view of the responsibility of the scientist and the intellectual in general." Even this information is not much to our purpose. For "an author's testimony on why he wrote as he did must always be treated with respect, but it is not always as authoritative as it seems." How then can we explain the change in Brecht's attitude at all? Perhaps
the most satisfactory answer, Trilling concludes, is that "his protean mind, doctrinal but indifferent to the claims of doctrinal consistency, happened at this moment to be captivated by the idea of an absolute intransigent morality and the heroism it calls for." It is remarkable how, starting from the data provided by the play itself, Trilling journeys effortlessly through history, biography, ideology and intention, and returns with more insight not only into the play—that would never by itself satisfy him, we feel—but into the nature of art and the workings of the artist's mind.

In fact, Trilling does not employ any one method but rather a variety of methods to realize the full complexity, the active intentionality of a work of art. This catholicity and flexibility enable him to discover the quiddity of the work on hand. The most famous example of his interpretative ability is his essay on Henry James's *The Princess Casamassima*. Trilling starts this essay characteristically by recording and accounting for the unpopularity of the novel (James's "imagination of disaster"), proceeds to "place" the novel in a great line through the


nineteenth century ("The Story of the Young Man from the Provinces"),
but immediately balances this view by demonstrating the density and accuracy of observation behind the novel (which is "a brilliantly precise representation of social actuality"), then establishes a delicate and rewarding bio-critical link between the dialectic in the novel and the dialectic in the James family ("The Princess Casamassima may, then, be thought of as an intensely autobiographical book, not in the sense of being the author's personal record but in the sense of being his personal act").

After this series of reconnoitring trips, fully armed and prepared, Trilling meets the complex challenge of interpretation thrown by the novel. The interpretation itself focuses on James's moral realism and the spirit of love behind the moral realism. The whole essay is a masterly exercise in seeing the object as in itself it really is. Since the aim of the essay, like that of the others in The Liberal Imagination, is "to recall liberalism to its primal

48 Ibid., pp. 75-78.
49 Ibid., pp. 78-84.
50 Ibid., pp. 86-89.
impulse of variousness, possibility, and complexity," the ideological preoccupation is kept well under control by the critic (as it has been by the writer in this case), and the complexity and inclusiveness of James's social vision ("Civilization has a price, and a high one"), his uncompromising moral realism ("In Paul Muniment a genuine idealism coexists with a secret desire for personal power") and his ultimate charity ("Suppose that truth be the expression, not of intellect, nor even, as we sometimes think, of will, but of love") are all fully brought out. There is thus no justification whatever for saying, as John Colmer does, that though Trilling illuminates the social background he tends to distort the novel to make it conform to his own radical ideology or that he misses the "duality" that "lies at the heart of James's fictional universe." On the contrary, it is precisely this "duality" that Trilling emphasizes throughout.

Sometimes, however, Trilling's preference for ideas in literature leads him into error. He observes, about Blake's Tyger, that in its fierceness and beauty, it can be regarded

51 Ibid., p. 93. 52 Ibid., p. 98. 53 Ibid., p. 95.

"as that manifestation of the human mind which we call genius." While we have no difficulty in accommodating this view, we pull up short when Trilling adds that "it can be thought to stand for the ruthless ferocity of political revolution, specifically of the French Revolution, with which Blake was much preoccupied." There is no warrant for this interpretation either in the poem itself or in the life of Blake. We can only conclude that Trilling has let himself be carried away by his political and sociological preoccupations.

But perhaps we may conclude by noticing a far more serious instance of failure of interpretation on Trilling's part—and surprisingly enough, the failure arises with regard to a poem of Wordsworth's. Trilling begins his essay on "The Immortality Ode" (in the Liberal Imagination) by considering and rejecting an interpretation of the poem "which is commonly made," viz. that the Ode is "Wordsworth's conscious farewell to his art, a dirge sung over his departing powers." Trilling says that this "erroneous interpretation" arises from "certain extraneous and unexpressed assumptions which some of its readers make about the nature of the mind." The "assumption" is "that poetry is made by means of a particular poetic faculty, a

55 Trilling, "Tyger! Tyger!" in Prefaces, p. 219.
faculty which may be isolated and defined." But "what we know of poetry does not allow us to refer the making of it to any single faculty. Nothing less than the whole mind, the whole man, will suffice for its origin." 56

Now we may say that here in fact lies the root of all Trilling's problems with regard to the poem and of the inadequacy of his interpretation of it. The truth of the matter, which Trilling's liberal thinking wouldn't let him grant, is that even "the whole mind" or "the whole man" "will not suffice" for the origin of poetry, at least for the poetry that Wordsworth wrote. A far more helpful attitude would be to accept "the vision and faculty divine" that, according to Coleridge, enabled Wordsworth to write in those early years. This is the attitude taken by acknowledged critics of Wordsworth like A.C. Bradley and H.W. Garrod. The latter says:

> For myself when poets tell me that they are inspired, I am disposed to believe them—I have found it always the shortest way, not only of placating them, but of understanding them. It may even be that it is the only way. 57

As Garrod points out, we are dealing, in the case of


But Wordsworth, with "impressions made upon a consciousness highly abnormal," But Trilling strangely insists on treating Wordsworth's childhood experiences in a perfectly "naturalistic" way. The highest state Trilling can posit is that in which the several parts of the mind are in harmony with Nature.

It is not surprising, then, given the insistence on a "naturalistic" interpretation, that a number of key words in the poem are not granted their full charge of meaning. But "dream," for instance, is not "illusion," it is everywhere in Wordsworth used with its Anglo-Saxon meaning of "joy." "Celestial light" is certainly not just "something different from ordinary, earthly, scientific light; . . . a light of the mind, shining even in darkness." The basic inadequacy also leads Trilling to make wrong (or, at any rate, less appropriate) connexions of the "Ode" with other poems of Wordsworth. Garrod is certainly right in reading the Ode with, and in the light

59 Trilling, "The Immortality Ode," in _II_, pp. 149-50; 153-54.
60 Ibid., p. 143. 61 Ibid., p. 139.
of, "The Rainbow" (which, with its conception of human days bound each to each by natural piety, gives "the clue to the interpretation of the Ode in its entirety"—a clue that Trilling deliberately refuses to take) and "The Cuckoo" (which presents the poet as "back in the world of those visionary experiences of childhood which he regarded as the source of the deepest illumination"). The "Rainbow" poem is in fact the "timely utterance" mentioned in the Ode. But Trilling oddly clutches at the word "sullen" in the Ode. Then follows a curious line of argument: There is another poem in which Wordsworth says he was sullen—"Resolution and Independence." This poem is therefore the "timely utterance" mentioned in the Ode. In this poem, though Wordsworth speaks of many other misfortunes that can befall a poet, "he never says that a poet stands in danger of losing his talent." Therefore, in the Ode too, he does not mourn, he is not saying farewell to, his talent for making poetry. The Ode is actually "not only not a dirge over departing powers but actually a dedication to new powers." It is true that Wordsworth did not realize his hopes for these new powers, "but that is quite another matter."

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64 Ibid., p. 138.
And then there is an amazing failure of plain understanding. "The second half of the Ode," Trilling says, meaning Stanzas V to XI, "is divided into two large movements, each of which gives an answer to the question with which the first part ends. The two answers seem to contradict each other. The first issues in despair, the second in hope." But there are no two answers and so no contradiction. The first movement explains the loss, the second states the "recompense."

Again, in his enthusiasm for Freud's ideas about the "oceanic sensation of being at one with the universe," Trilling refuses to accept yet another connexion or rather two more connexions to which Garrod draws attention, the links with "The Character of the Happy Warrior" and "Ode to Duty." The Happy Warrior is one who has bound his days together. He is one who

when brought
Among the tasks of real life, hath wrought
Upon the plan that pleased his childish thought.

And in "Ode to Duty," Wordsworth speaks of "the genial sense of youth." In both these poems, Wordsworth takes us "from the natural to the moral world." This process is

66 Ibid., p. 150.
inevitable but the purer moral life is that which is bound up with childhood's "unthinking vision." It is the coming of this "purer moral life" that is celebrated in the last part of the Ode.

It is perhaps unfair to end a chapter on Lionel Trilling's applied criticism with this adverse reference to his interpretation of "The Immortality Ode," but the intention has been not so much to illustrate his failure as to show his interest in the role of the poet as citizen which forces him to interpret even a purely Romantic expressive poem like "The Immortality Ode" as a poem concerned with the problem of adjustment, coming to terms with life, etc. What Trilling said of Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" we could say of this poem too, that the experience here is highly personal. At any rate, the poem has no social dimension. Even as Matthew Arnold's interest in society allowed him to perceive Wordsworth as primarily a poet of "joy in the


68 Helen Darbishire confirms this way of looking at the Ode. She says that the subject here, as elsewhere in Wordsworth, is "what in man is human and divine." But "man and nature must be the man and nature that he, Wordsworth, knows." Again, "the theme is for him the central theme, the immortal nature of the human spirit, intuitively known by the child, partly forgotten by the growing man, but to be known once more in maturity through intense experience of heart and mind" (Helen Darbishire, The Poet Wordsworth (1950; rpt. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1960), pp. 66-67).
widest commonalty spread" and not as a mystic or a philosopher, Trilling would mainly relate the poem to the poet's role as a citizen, coming to terms with a world which is against art and against certain types of uniqueness. It is chiefly this attitude to poetry that brings him again close to Arnold.

69 Arnold had no great admiration for the "Immortality Ode," evidently because of its highly personal nature.