CHAPTER EIGHT

THE RHETORIC OF DISINTERESTEDNESS

Lionel Trilling's prose style, Robert Langbaum has said, is "his greatest achievement."¹ The achievement, we may add, is the more remarkable in a critic of the twentieth century, a time when lucidity is seldom met with or even demanded. The factors behind this achievement are not hard to perceive. There is first Trilling's studied avoidance of all kinds of jargon, of what Northrop Frye would call "terminological buccaneering." Edmund Wilson very early saw Trilling's virtues as a prose writer and remarked that Trilling "has escaped the great vice of his generation: the addiction to obfuscatory terminology."² In this respect Trilling's style stands out in marked contrast to that of the New Critics. Trilling wrote "as a man addressing other men about the urgency of human affairs", whereas the New Critics wrote "as literary technicians addressing other literary technicians."³ As Trilling himself noted, in a

¹Robert Langbaum, "Return of the Native," TLS, 10 Nov. 1978, p. 1313.


somewhat amused tone, the manner of writing of the New Critics is in accord with their assumption that their audience is already adept in the study of literature and the study of criticism; their mode of exposition "responds to the knowledge, or knowingness, of the audience they address." \(^4\) Trilling on the contrary avoids not only the jargon of literary criticism but also the terminology of the other fields of knowledge with which he is familiar; more remarkable still, he invents no jargon of his own.

For jargon is the language not of knowledge but of knowingness, not of thought but of non-thought, not of thinking but of abstraction, not of ideas but of ideology. Trilling is horrified at the prospect that

people will eventually be unable to say "They fell in love and married," let alone understand the language of Romeo and Juliet, but will as a matter of course say, "Their libidinal impulses being reciprocal, they activated their individual erotic drives and integrated them within the same frame of reference." \(^5\)

In this concern for language as a promoter or corrupter of thinking Trilling takes his place with George Orwell among

\(^4\) Trilling, "Preface" to LC, p. xi. Trilling mentions Ransom, Blackmur, Kenneth Burke and Empson in this connexion. There is of course the work of Cleanth Brooks as a distinguished exception.

the moderns and surely his own hero Matthew Arnold himself.

One of the characteristic features of Arnold's style was his habit of repeating certain words and phrases: "barbarians," "Philistines," "sweetness and light," "the best that has been known and thought," etc. Chesterton called this the manner of the patient master of an idiot school. It is perhaps better to ascribe this habit, as Trilling does, to Arnold's "desire to make himself understood exactly as he wished." Arnold was well aware of...

6 We may give just one instance of Arnold's horror of all kinds of "scientific" jargon. In the 1865 text of "The Function of Criticism" Arnold appended the following footnote to the passage: "to count by tens is the easiest way of counting": "A writer in the Saturday Review, who has offered me some counsels about style for which I am truly grateful, suggests that this should stand as follows: To take as your unit an established base of notation, ten being given as the base of notation, is, except for numbers under twenty, the simplest way of counting. I tried it so, but I assure him, without jealousy, that the more I looked at his improved way of putting the thing, the less I liked it. It seems to me that the maxim, in this shape, would never make the tour of a world, where most of us are plain, easy-spoken people. He forgets that he is a reasoner, a member of a school, a disciple of the great Bentham, and that he naturally talks in the scientific way of his school, with exact accuracy, philosophic propriety; I am a mere solitary wanderer in search of the light, and I talk an artless, unstudied, every-day, familiar language. But, after all, this is the language of the mass of the world" (Essays in Criticism; First Series, ed. Sister Hoctor, pp. 253-54).

7 Trilling, MA, p. 267 f.n., where Chesterton's words are also quoted.
the breach in understanding between leaders of thought and those who follow them.

It is not difficult to find some such recurrent words and phrases in Trilling's own critical writings. What this tells us of Trilling's attitude to his public we shall study later on in this chapter. We may first notice what these verbal habits reveal of Trilling's preoccupations as a man and writer.

Given Trilling's commitment to the critical intellect, we are not surprised to find a fair sprinkling of words relating to intellectual processes: "dialectic," "formulation," "conception," "awareness," "assent," "agreement," etc. And almost always he speaks of these in military terms, in terms of "engagement," "resistance," "conquest," "conflict," "confrontation," "hostility," "assault," or in terms of concrete things, physical experiences or processes: "stuff," "recalcitrance," "amalgamation," and so on. Again, he speaks of certain ideas and values as being more "available" than others. All these words tell us of the reality and the energy with which Trilling invested and lived the life of the mind.

And we meet with such vocabulary not just in essays like "The Situation of the American Intellectual at the Present Time," or "Mind in the Modern World," we find it
even in essays which are, more apparently, works of literary criticism. The fact, as we have seen earlier, is that Trilling views literary works as springing out of and offering themselves to the scrutiny of the critical intellect. Thus, referring to the sins that Oedipus has committed, Trilling says:

> even the idea of sin does not comprehend the horror of a man's having killed his father and married his mother. These acts are, as we say, unthinkable; the human mind can do nothing with them.®

Or again, comparing Oedipus with a popular tale of similar import:⁹

> In its barest outline, the story of Oedipus is no different from this—a man, fleeing his fate, encounters it. But the wry little parable of fatalism evokes no other response than an ironic shrug; the mind does not engage it, there is really nothing in the tale for the mind to engage. The implied generalization, that all men must

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⁸Trilling, "Oedipus Rex," in Prefaces, p. 3.

⁹"In the city of Ispahan, in Persia, a certain man's servant came to him and said, 'I was in the market place and there I saw Death and he made a threatening gesture to me.' The man said, 'Let us flee,' and he and his servant set out posthaste for Samarra. No sooner had they entered that city than they encountered Death, to whom the man said, 'Why did you threaten my servant in the market place in Ispahan?' Death replied, 'My gesture was not one of threat but of surprise, for I had an appointment to meet you in Samarra, and I was surprised to learn, from seeing your servant, that you were still in Ispahan.'" (Trilling, "Oedipus Rex," in Prefaces, pp. 6-7).
submit to what is ordained for them, . . . may win from us a certain assent but not much interest.10

Both the idea and the language here reveal Trilling's conviction that the pleasure that great literature affords is primarily an intellectual pleasure.

"He was our historian of the moral life of modernity, our philosopher of culture,"11 wrote Steven Marcus and Trilling's language constantly bears witness to his role as a cultural and moral historian. His finest passages are those in which he combines acute observation with discriminating evaluation:

It seemed to me that there was particular usefulness in the circumstance that this anti-hero [Rameau's Nephew] should avow so openly his envy, which Tocqueville has called the ruling emotion of democracy, and that . . . what chiefly animated him [the Nephew] was envy of men of genius. Ours is the first cultural epoch in which many men aspire to high achievement in the arts, and, in their frustration, form a dispossessed class which cuts across the conventional class lines, making a proletariat of the spirit.12

The tentative approach from the literary text to the cultural situation ("It seemed to me . . .") moves through a


firmness of cultural generalization ("Ours is the first
cultural epoch . . .") to an elegant formulation ("making
a proletariat of the spirit") which is also at the same
time a deftly phrased judgment.

The key words in such cultural documentation are
"self," "society," "individual will," "literary lives,"
"cultural lives," and of course the personal pronoun "we"
with its inflected forms "our" and "us."

But the ubiquitous "we" of these cultural generali­
zations is not semantically stable. The anonymous TLS
reviewer of The Opposing Self collection could not make
up his mind to anything more than that "we" in these
essays occupied a place intermediate between "the self"
and "the society":

Mr Trilling's "we" sometimes means just the people
of our time as a whole; more often the English-
reading public; more often still Americans in
general; most often of all a very narrow class
indeed, consisting, it seems, of New York intel·
lectuals as judged primarily by his own brighter
students in Columbia. 13

The difficulty is undeniably present. When Trilling
observes, while writing on Scott Fitzgerald, "our culture
peculiarly honours the act of blaming, which it takes as

13 "Preoccupations of a Critic," TLS, 26 August 1955,
p. 492."
the sign of virtue and intellect," we are fairly certain that he refers to the liberal reading public of America. When he writes, "History, as we now understand it, envisions its own extinction," we can be almost sure he means the modern, post-Second World War, consciousness. But when he asks rhetorically, "Who among us has any adequate idea about the quality of the teaching staffs of the schools? What is the literary curriculum of our high schools? . . . What happens in colleges?" we are inclined to say, with David Daiches, that here is the metropolitan, especially the New York, intellectual, unjustifiably generalizing from his somewhat limited observation.

Trilling himself is not unaware of the problem. He refers, in the Preface to Beyond Culture, to the charges of ambiguity or vagueness. He would however claim that cultural continuities do exist and further that, though

17 David Daiches, "The Mind of Lionel Trilling: An Appraisal," Commentary, 24 (July 1957), p. 67. Daiches shows the experience of his colleagues and his own experience to be different from Trilling's.
the pronoun may quite often mean in the context a small group of people like the New York intellectuals, the group is not as uninfluential as is commonly supposed. Between that class and a similar group elsewhere in the world, there would be found to exist a natural understanding.  

We must also remember that Trilling generally included himself in the "we"/"us" he was criticizing. After all if he took literature to be a criticism of life, he certainly didn't suppose it to be a criticism of all other lives except his own. He certainly did not claim, or even want to achieve, the Olympian, the somewhat amused detachment that Arnold often displayed ("Lord, what fools these mortals be!"). When he says, in his essay on Orwell, "The extent to which Communism made use of unregenerate force was perfectly clear years ago, but many of us found it impossible to acknowledge this fact because Communism spoke boldly to our love of ideas and ideals," he certainly does not make an exception of his own early ideological predilections.

But perhaps the whole problem presented by Trilling's use of the pronoun is not really so important as a carping

\[18^\text{Trilling, "Preface" to BC, pp. ix-xi.}\]

\[19^\text{Trilling, "George Orwell," in OS, p. 152.}\]
criticism might make it out. The language that Trilling employed was often the language of self-scrutiny. For, as Steven Marcus wrote, in Trilling "the project of literary critical analysis is at the same time a project of conscious self-examination." But Trilling's language was also the language of the cultural historian. Feeling as we do the general accuracy of his observation and the perspicacity of his judgment, we could well say, with Harry Levin, that "his characteristic use of the pronoun is simply an aspect of his persuasiveness; and whoever we may be, we are fortunate in having so lucid and sensible a spokesman." We are grateful for the connexions that Trilling points to—"between the aesthetic and the moral, between literature and life, between culture and environment"—and for the genuine aperçu that he provides.

Since Trilling's language is also the language of liberalism, at any rate the kind of liberalism that he himself wished should prevail, the words we most frequently


meet with, especially in *The Liberal Imagination*, are "flexibility," "variety," "difficulty," "complexity," "possibility," "modulation," "complication," "moral realism," "moral imagination," "liberal imagination," and so on. These are the qualities that he wanted liberalism to cultivate and deploy. These, as R.W.B. Lewis remarked in his review of *The Liberal Imagination*, are the marks of his mind, "they are also the burden of his song."23

R.W.B. Lewis also has another useful insight into Trilling's style which helps him to show how appropriate and organic it is to the liberal's skepticism. Lewis quotes two crucial paragraphs from *The Liberal Imagination*. In the first of these two paragraphs Trilling poses the question why liberal democratic ideas have not produced a great body of literature. The causes of this, Trilling says in the second paragraph, are not to be sought in the absence of the ideas of traditional religion from our culture. In fact, though Trilling admits that religious ideas have in the past contributed to the literary qualities we want, he does not believe religion to be a condition of great literature. What is more, he considers it "an

impropriety to try to guarantee literature by religious belief."

Now Lewis contrasts "the sharpness and luminosity of the question as stated in the first paragraph" with "the plethora of modifications, undercuttings, and protective adjectives in the second" and "the fascinating ambiguities in the operative word 'impropriety' in the final sentence." Lewis then adds:

It may at least be noted that the pressure of words and phrases like "absence from our culture", "impressive," "traditional," "historical fact," "effective means of transmitting," "feel are necessary for the literary qualities"—that this pressure is such as to reverse proper relationships and identify opposites. But I rather think that what the passage reveals in particular is a characteristic contemporary restlessness before, as they are distressingly called, "absolute values." Both the language and the texture of thought indicate the way in which affirmation of rejection appears to anyone who sincerely wishes to contain simultaneously in his mind the yes and the no of his culture (emphasis added).  

Lewis's perceptive commentary leads us on to another characterization we can make of Trilling's prose: that it is the language of Arnoldian disinterestedness. Not only

24 Trilling, "The Meaning of a Literary Idea," in LI, pp. 299-300. The two paragraphs begin as "And since liberal democracy . . ." and "The answer to it . . ." respectively. They are the fourth and third paragraphs from the end of the essay.

the vocabulary but the very syntax plays an organic role in his achieved objectivity. A significant example would perhaps be the following one from his review of T.S. Eliot's *The Idea of a Christian Society*: here is Trilling confronting a view which fascinates him even as it rouses his most rigorous skepticism:

I am far from thinking that Mr Eliot supplies a new world; yet in this troubled time when we are bound to think of eventual reconstructions, I should like to recommend to the attention of readers probably hostile to religion Mr Eliot's religious politics. I say no more than recommend to the attention; I certainly do not recommend Mr Eliot's ideas to the allegiance. But here we are . . .

In that oscillating syntax ("I am far from thinking," "yet," "I should like to recommend," "no more than recommend," "to the attention," "not . . . to the allegiance," "But here we are . . ."), we perceive the anxiety to play fair, the anxiety not to be misunderstood. "The purpose of language," Plato said, "is not so much to make people understand as to prevent them from misunderstanding."

At no other time has misunderstanding been as much possible, as much available, as Trilling might say, as in our age of ideology. In the passage we have just quoted, we see Trilling striving not to be misunderstood by either the

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advocates of a Christian society—who may jump at having
won a convertite—or his own friends the liberal humanists—
who may rush to rejoice at his rejection of Eliot's reli-
gious politics. The balancing mind is at work in the
following passage too:

For theology I do not make a stand, but when Mr Eliot
is accused of "faith," of the "surrender" of his
intellect to "authority," it is hard to see, when
the accusers are Marxist intellectuals, how their
own action was always so very different. If we have
the right to measure the personal and moral value of
convictions by the disinterested intellectual effort
through which they are arrived at, we might find
that Mr Eliot's conversion was notably more honorable
than that of many who impugned his decision. 27

where the sentences are fairly equally divided between the
two points of view. The "dialectical turns and returns"
of Trilling's mind, if we employ the words he used to.describe Hegel's Phenomenology, 28 are neatly reflected in
Trilling's style of discourse which "moved to the movement
of ideas." 29

Such a style of discourse is also eminently suited
for making fine distinctions. The style everywhere bears

27Ibid., p. 369.


29Steven Marcus, "The Liberal Imagination," American
witness to a mind moving effortlessly amidst ideas, discovering even the faintest relationships and differences among them. The distinction that he so masterfully draws and illustrates between sincerity and authenticity is an instance in point. But throughout that book we see the discriminating mind at work distinguishing between authors, works and ideas. For example:

This formulation [that civilization has corrupted the elemental, essential nature of man] is not alien to Rousseau's intention, but it is not what he says in The First Discourse.\(^\text{30}\)

The next sentence could well be taken as a classic statement of the psychology of comprehension:

What he does say goes so much against our settled views that we cannot readily accept that he really does say it.\(^\text{31}\)

The vocabulary of comparison and association is found everywhere:

Rousseau's condemnation of the actor's trade is similar to Plato's but not exactly the same.\(^\text{32}\)

We find therefore in Trilling, alongside the scientist's habit of making valid generalizations, also the poet's passion for discovering the individuality, the quiddity of each idea. If there is any such thing as a deadly sin

\(^{30}\) Trilling, S&A, p. 60. \(^{31}\) Ibid. \(^{32}\) Ibid., p. 64.
in his scheme of values, it must be the holding of an unmodulated idea. As R.W.B. Lewis once again remarks, Trilling must have often pursed his lips a little over T.S. Eliot's "incorrigible employment of the 'spirited phrase' (i.e. the unmodulated opinion)." Trilling's own style, says Lewis, "gravitates more willingly toward an earlier writer like Montaigne . . . who was pleased by the man from Delphos because he could even tell one egg from another"!  

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One of the major achievements of Matthew Arnold as a critic and prose writer is to have evolved and upheld a civilized tone of discourse, a tone "perfectly adapted to the art of criticism,"--"colloquial yet reserved, cool yet able to glow into warmth, careful never to flare into heat."  

Arnold conceived the spirit of criticism to be the opposite of the provincial spirit. The provincial spirit, he said, lacks graciousness:

it does not persuade, it makes war; it has not urbanity, the tone of the city, of the centre, the tone which always aims at a spiritual and intellectual effect . . . the provincial tone is more violent, and seems to aim rather at an effect upon the blood and senses than upon

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34 Trilling, MA, p. 190.
the spirit and intellect; it loves hard-hitting rather than persuading.\textsuperscript{35}

And Arnold indicted John Milton\textsuperscript{36} as vehemently as he did the contemporary Saturday Review for their lack of amenity even as he praised Joubert for displaying it.\textsuperscript{37} Arnold himself, as Basil Willey notes, possessed this rather un-English trait of amenity.\textsuperscript{38}

"Lionel Trilling bears, doubtless with fortitude," remarked Clifton Fadiman, "the most aggressively euphonious name of any writer since Edna St Vincent Millay."\textsuperscript{39} As if to soften the aggressive impact that he unconsciously made with his name, Trilling consistently adopts an urbane, equable, sweet-tempered tone. It is in this amenity of tone as much as in his constant striving towards objectivity that Trilling most resembles Arnold. The tone of


\textsuperscript{36}"I mean not to dispute philosophy with this pork, who never read any," said Milton when someone answered his Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce. Arnold cites the remark in his lecture on "Equality," (EMA, p. 596).

\textsuperscript{37}Arnold, "Joubert," in Essays in Criticism, p. 159.


Trilling's discourse, as John Bayley said comparing it to Arnold's, "has the same tranquillizing function: to calm and satisfy us like the poetry that Arnold most admired."

Trilling holds tone to be of the greatest importance because any lapse in tone, he feels, can get in the way of a sane discourse or betray our "pledge to the critical intellect." Dr Leavis' tone, he says writing on the Leavis-Snow controversy, "is a bad tone, an impermissible tone." It is bad in a personal sense because it is "cruel—it manifestly intends to wound." It is bad intellectually because it diverts attention, including Dr Leavis' attention, from what he seeks to illuminate; it stands in the way of what Dr Leavis means to say.

To take another instance, Trilling was asked in a Commentary Symposium, "Do the recent revelations concerning covert CIA backing of projects . . . prove that liberal

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41 Trilling, "The Leavis-Snow Controversy," in BC, p. 150. "Who . . . issues the permits?" Dan Jacobson peevishly asks, "That New York 'authority'?" ("Beyond Whose Culture?" Commentary, 41, No. 3 (March 1966), p. 90). All that Trilling means is that such a tone is impermissible if we are to talk to, and not at, each other.

anti-communism has been a dupe of, or a slave to, the darker impulses of American foreign policy?" Trilling admitted that the backing was indeed a disaster in American national life. "The unhappy business is not to be defended, but its actual meaning requires to be rationally estimated." This of course is a characteristic first response but more to our immediate point is the next sentence: "One aspect of the disaster is the license that has been given to the voluptuous moralizing that issues in the insensate and vulgar judgments you paraphrase." What distresses Trilling here, as in the campus riots of 1963, is the decline in the tone of speech.

Trilling's modest and reasonable tone can often hide the unorthodox nature of his opinions. We may cite the critique of the Kinsey Report in which Trilling pours gentle ridicule on the Report's simplistic concept of the natural:

Professor Kinsey is like no one so much as Sir Percival in Malory, who, seeing a lion and a serpent in battle with each other, decided to help the lion, "for he was the more natural beast of the two."  

43 Trilling, Contribution to "Liberal Anti-Communism Revisited: A Symposium," Commentary, 44 (Sept. 1967), 76.  

Trilling's tone however achieves unusual intensity—something like scorn, though it is always controlled scorn—when he is protesting against the pieties of pseudo-liberals or against the radical pieties of the prophets of madness. Thus, about Theodore Dreiser and his liberal admirers:

with us it is always a little too late for mind, yet never too late for honest stupidity; always a little too late for understanding, never too late for righteous, bewildered wrath; always too late for thought, never too late for naive moralizing.45

Or, on the "madness-is-health" theories of R.D. Laing, Norman O. Brown and David Cooper:

To deal with this phenomenon of our intellectual culture in the way of analytical argument would, I think, be supererogatory. The position may be characterized as being in an intellectual mode to which analytical argument is not appropriate. This is the intellectual mode that once went under the name of cant.46

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Any discussion of Trilling's style, as of Arnold's, must sooner or later make mention of irony. But to do that is also to be reminded immediately of the differences between the two writers. Trilling in his essay on Mansfield Park distinguishes between two kinds of irony. One is

45Trilling, "Reality in America," in LI, p. 31.
verbal irony and irony of tone, the rhetorical device by which "we say one thing and intend its opposite, or intend more, or less, than we say." With this irony may go a kind of moral detachment and a tone of superiority. The second kind of irony is "irony as a quality of someone's mind, Montaigne's for example." This irony is a method of comprehension, so to speak.

It is obvious that both kinds of irony are present in Matthew Arnold's work. The quality of his mind helped him to perceive, for example, the wide disparity between his countrymen's lofty views of themselves and their actual state. But he never lost even the slightest opportunity of communicating this ironic perception by methods of comic irony. Understatement was a favourite device. For instance, the typical Englishman, he said, is "not very open to new ideas, and not easily ravished by them."

Another strategy was the assumption of an air of injured innocence in the course of polemics. Here is Arnold replying to I.C. Wright who had protested against Arnold's adverse criticism of his translation of the Iliad:

One cannot be always studying one's own works, and I was really under the impression, till I


saw Mr Wright's complaint, that I had spoken of him with all respect.  

Now Trilling does employ the first kind of irony—verbal irony or irony of tone—on occasions. Even on these occasions, the ironic passage is tucked away, if we may say so, with as little brilliance as Trilling could manage it. Thus, speaking of a contradiction in Herbert Marcuse's view of mind in its relation to society:

No doubt there is some Hegelian device which will properly resolve the contradiction between Marcuse's predilection for the strongly defined character-structure that necessity entails and his polemical commitment to a Utopia which will do away with necessity. I have not been able to discover that this dialectical ingenuity has been brought into play.  

Or, about the modern unquestioning acceptance of the doctrine of alienation:

That the world is a cheat, its social arrangements a sham, its rewards a sell, was patent to us from our moral infancy, whose first spoken words were, "Take away that bauble."  

But far more central to Trilling's work is irony as a mode of perception. In the passage just quoted for

49 Arnold, "Preface" to Essays in Criticism, p. 3.

50 Trilling, S&A, p. 166.

example, what informs and animates the verbal irony is the awareness of the irony in the situation: the new conditioning into non-conformity as against the old conditioning into conformity. Such a mode of comprehension is pervasive in Beyond Culture and the later chapters of Sincerity and Authenticity, not to speak of other books. It is difficult to illustrate this kind of irony with short single passages. The units of organization are sections or whole essays rather than sentences or even paragraphs. Here, however, is the concluding, summarizing part of a section on a heresy of Rousseau's—that personal autonomy is corrupted, not fostered, by art. Rousseau's view goes against "one of our most esteemed certitudes":

Yet at the present time certain developments in the ecology of art must make us less confident of this than we once were. The unprecedented proliferation of art, the ease with which formerly esoteric or repellent art-forms are accepted, the fascinating conjunction of popular and commercial art with what used to be called advanced art—these circumstances do not support the old belief that art fosters a personal autonomy. Say, if you like, that art conducts to the individual certain of the more rarefied cultural energies, moves him in certain hitherto untaken directions, offers him such confirmation of the sense of individuality as may be found in social enclaves organized around aesthetic preferences. But this is not autonomy; the rule, the law, derives from others. Rousseau, living in an age when the new opinion-forming power of art could already be discerned, says nothing more, nor less, than this.\(^2\)

The unobtrusive lucidity of the passage masks the ironic perception of the contradictions inherent in the new movement for autonomy, masks the skepticism directed against an opinion cherished by, among others, Trilling himself. The irony becomes apparent when we juxtapose the critic's enduring conviction that literature is a criticism of life with the present somewhat embarrassed recognition that literature—at least some modern versions of it—may do no more than "conduct to the individual certain of the more rarefied cultural energies" or "move him in certain hitherto untaken directions."

One misses in Trilling, what it is perhaps unfair to look for or demand, the note of zest and joy that mark all Arnold's prose writings. Seldom has the New York professor been guilty of the "vivacity" that Arnold was so often charged with and that Arnold himself sometimes regretted. One can't imagine Trilling saying for example that such and such a work had no reason for existing.53

Such moments of hilarity are so rare in Trilling

53 Arnold said that about I.C. Wright's translation of the Iliad. He subsequently withdrew the phrase with another rhetorical flourish of humility: "Well, the phrase had, perhaps, too much vivacity; we have all of us a right to exist, we and our works; an unpopular author should be the last person to call in question this right" (Preface to Essays in Criticism, p. 4).
that one easily remembers the few there are. Here is
Trilling reviewing a book by a woman critic who showed
a dislike for the more masculine writers:

Miss Monroe is a kind of Prioress of criticism,
and though surrounded by lively Reeves, Millers
and Carpenters in the form of Hemingway, Dos Passos
and Huxley, she will have no farthing of grease on
her cup of life; so clean does she wipe her lip. 54

The banter here, without any malice, is reminiscent of
the best Arnold. So is the following sentence about
Pope-Hennessey's biography of Richard Monckton Milnes:

Having occasion to refer to The English Notebooks
of Hawthorne, he speaks of them as having been
"very sanely edited" by Professor Randall Stewart,
as if the Notebooks were a natural temptation to
torial frenzy, an impression which he confirms
by speaking of them as having been "sponsored" in
England by the Oxford University Press; in my
experience, the O.U.P. publishes rather than
sponsors books, and I cannot understand why it
should have changed its practice on this one
occasion. 55

"Nothing so bound Jacques and me as our love of pun-
ing," says Trilling in an essay of personal reminiscence
of and tribute to Jacques Barzun. 56 But if, excited by

54 Trilling, "Artists and the 'Societal' Function,"
Kenyon Review, 4 (Autumn 1942), 430.

55 Trilling, "Profession: Man of the World," in AGF,
p. 114 f.n.

56 Trilling, "A Personal Memoir," posthumously pub-
lished in From Parnassus: Essays in Honor of Jacques
Barzun, ed. Dora B. Weiner and William R. Keylor (New
this remark, we comb the pages of Trilling's works for a
generous display of this love, we would be disappointed.
When it does show itself, however, it has a striking effect,
as in the essay on George Orwell:

He used no political jargon, and he made no
recriminations. He made no effort to show that
his heart was in the right place, or the left
place... He was interested only in telling
the truth.\textsuperscript{57}

Other kinds of verbal effects are also rare. Here is a
quaint instance from the opening paragraph of the piece
on Robert Graves:

certain of the pieces of his first volumes were
among the staples of the anthologies of the day and
were as widely admired as they were Untermeyered.\textsuperscript{58}

But these are rare instances of flamboyance. In
general, however, the burden of having to see the object
as in itself it really is seems to sit rather heavily on
the critic's shoulders. There is, as someone said, a
good case for a cartoon à la Max Beerbohm with the cap-
tion: "Mr Trilling as Mind In Process of Correcting a
Course It Has Taken."

But if Trilling is without Arnold's irrepressible

\textsuperscript{57}Trilling, "George Orwell," in \textit{OS}, pp. 171-72.
\textsuperscript{58}Trilling, "A Ramble on Graves," in \textit{AGF}, p. 20.
vivacity and comic sense, he is also without the tone of superiority that occasionally marked Arnold's wit and humour. In fact, Trilling assiduously avoids the tendency to pompous pronouncement. If Trilling is without Arnold's knowledge of what is common he is also free from Arnold's Olympian scorn for the vulgar and the unrefined. This fact generally shows itself in the respective tones of the two writers.

The differences we have considered may incline us to say, in a somewhat summary way, that Arnold's writings in general have the force of statements while Trilling's have the tentativeness of a dialectic. Perhaps that is not the whole truth. Not that there is in Arnold no questioning, no re-examination, only certainties. He does all the doubting and the questioning for himself but offers us the conclusions whereas Trilling does the thinking, concluding, revising, to-and-froing, here, as he goes on. The characteristic use that the two critics make of irony—the one as a weapon of attack and the other as a mode of

59 Walter Raleigh refers to the cruel, the somewhat uncharitable fun that Arnold had by playing on and repeating certain proper nouns: Clutterbuck, Cobbe, Dodd, Wragg. It is, Raleigh says, as though Arnold thought that these people had lost all claim to any humanity and dignity by reason of their having such names (Walter Raleigh, "Matthew Arnold," in Some Authors: A Collection of Literary Essays 1896-1916 (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1923), p. 308).
perception and defence—would also seem to reinforce this view. We may thus be led to characterize the style of Arnold as expository and that of Trilling as exploratory. At any rate, Trilling's prose often has the quality that certain kinds of poetry have: he seems to discover what he wants to say only when he says it.

But we must be on our guard against simplifying, especially about Arnold who so deceptively invites simplifications. The fact is Arnold is not always a preacher and schoolmaster, expounding and explaining. He has also his moments of vision, enthusiasm, admiration, etc. even in his prose criticism. And when he is so touched, the true voice of feeling speaks through him (e.g. when he writes on Homer, Milton, Wordsworth). Arnold's style is therefore expository, of course, but also declaratory of his faith or intuition.

But perhaps the whole exercise in comparison is uncalled for. For style is ultimately a personal matter, an image of personal being, as Trilling might say. Moreover, if style is also partly determined by external factors, the factors, the social and political environments for instance, influencing the two writers were different. Arnold was himself aware how different styles
were required in different ages. The twentieth century certainly affords far less scope for high-spiritedness than Arnold's age did. "We shall none of us be amusing much longer," Arnold himself had said.  

* * *

Before we conclude this chapter, we may notice some of the criticisms made against Trilling's style. One charge is that it, especially the later style, is laboured with abstractions. Now a certain degree of abstraction is inevitable when a writer customarily deals with such impalpable entities as society, culture, will, self or such ideas as sincerity, autonomy, the pleasure principle, the reality principle, etc. It is remarkable however that no such complaint has been voiced against the earlier works, e.g. against Matthew Arnold, E.M. Forster or the essays collected in The Liberal Imagination. The fact is that these works were written, and received, with a sense of political urgency. At no other time did the connexion

60 "Had Shakespeare and Milton lived in the atmosphere of modern feeling, had they had the multitude of new thoughts and feelings a modern has, I think it likely the style of each would have been far less curious and exquisite" (The Correspondence of Arthur Hugh Clough, ed. F.L. Mulhauser, 1957, cited by Geoffrey Tillotson, A View of Victorian Literature (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978), p. 37).

between literature and politics seem so valid but also so much in need of a precise formulation. The thirties and forties were the time of that curious, that paradoxical phenomenon, Stalinist liberalism. The burden of Trilling's song was to show how the two terms could not be reconciled. The situation, however, has, over the last three decades, become more confused, less capable of any kind of formulation, thanks to the Cold War, Viet Nam, Cambodia, the emergence of China and many other centres of power, and the revolt against all order and sense of values.

Another charge is that the style is overwrought giving an impression of gentility. Thus Frederick Hoffman, comparing Beyond Culture with Philip Rahv's The Myth and the Powerhouse, says, "Of course, Trilling's book is by far the more difficult to tolerate, because it is by all odds the more exquisitely written." Well, there was a time when "exquisite" was a term of praise. Now "exquisiteness" only provokes people committed to a

62 Frederick Hoffman, "The New Gentility," Nation, 8 Nov. 1965, p. 334. Hoffman says that Trilling and Rahv represent a new form of gentility because both would rather be critics of nineteenth-century literature than of the twentieth. Hoffman seems to have ignored the struggle that Trilling faced between his own responses as a reader and his sense of unease as a teacher—between his awareness of modern works as subjects and his students' ready assimilation of them as objects (Ibid., pp. 334-35).
conception of "beauty" as the enemy of "truth." "Bloomsbury Square on Morningside Heights"—this is how another reviewer describes Trilling's prose style adding that in Beyond Culture the tone is "wearily genteel." This is to forget the fact that Trilling's ceremonious prose is "a way of elevating himself, in Arnold's manner, above his immediate time and place." As for gentility, it is not exactly being genteel to question, as Trilling does in Beyond Culture, the usefulness and truthfulness of literature ("art does not always tell the truth or point out the right way").

David Kubal traces Trilling's civilized style of discourse to his Arnoldian conviction that in the contemporary situation criticism should do what the imagination alone could not, that is, discover fresh ideas for the use of the creative writer:

Trilling tried to achieve this task not by exhortation but by his style and manner of discourse—indirection and reticence and humor together with a disinclination for pronouncement, accusation and


64 Robert Langbaum, "Return of the Native," TLS, 10 Nov. 1978, p. 1313.

65 Trilling, "Preface" to BC, p. xvii.
invective—the qualities that marred F.R. Leavis' work.66

A far more serious charge against the style turns out to be one against the strategy of irony and disinterestedness itself. It is that often "the affirmatives and negatives gracefully cancel each other out and we are left holding too many impalpables."67 This feeling is bound to arise in us given Trilling's aversion to an unmodulated idea. Along with the balancing act also goes a tentativeness of tone and vocabulary. Tony Tanner, who significantly titles his review of Beyond Culture as "Lionel Trilling's Uncertainties," records his impression that "it sounds as though the ability to live strenuously among uncertainties has slackened into a habit," and exclaims, "No one with his earned stature need be as tentative and delicate as that!" However, Tanner concludes, "given the importance and centrality of the questions which Trilling is asking, these stylistic matters are unimportant."68

But the best description of Trilling's style is that


given by Lewis Leary who shows how Trilling's style is after all an organic image of his personal being:

Trilling's own style reveals much of his intellectual persuasions. It circles cautiously around the truth it seeks, tentatively, even hesitatingly, a step forward here, then sideways, or perhaps a movement backward, but ever circling closer and closer with a quick eye and with a rhythm and grace of movement which certifies competence and insures success. His dialectic suggests that, yes, of course, some one observation is precisely true, but that this other also requires profound consideration, so that, taken together, and joined with other facts, and with other assumptions intervening, they finally reach a conclusion which his verbal dexterity guarantees indestructible. 69