CHAPTER NINE

THE LIBERAL DILEMMA

An attempt was made in the foregoing pages to examine the implications of the statement, so commonly made, that Lionel Trilling is a critic in the Arnoldian tradition. The objective was simply to push the inquiry as far as possible and to discover and record significant affinities, similarities and differences between the two critics. The extended comparison has proved unmistakably that though Trilling differs in many significant respects from Arnold, he comes closest to Arnold in all that is likely to be enduring in his own work. It is now time to bring the matters discussed in the earlier chapters into some focus and also to attempt an estimate of Trilling's achievement as a critic.

One way of viewing the relationship between Arnold and Trilling leads us to say that quite often Trilling starts from a position somewhat antithetical to Arnold's but returns in course of time to a point of view similar to Arnold's. Trilling's shifting interpretation of liberalism is an instance in point. Trilling saw himself in the same line of Romantic liberals--Burke, Wordsworth and Shelley--to which he assigned Arnold. His liberalism,
however, as we saw earlier, operated in a different context from Arnold's. Arnold's mission consisted in checking the contemporary liberal impulse towards "doing as one likes." Trilling's task in the Stalinist liberal environment of the thirties was to reassert the old liberal values of individualism, variousness and complexity. Trilling simply pointed out that "Stalinist liberalism" was a contradiction in terms. However, as the modern movement in authenticity progressed, Trilling came to perceive and state the need for centrality, order and control.

But to leave the matter there is to ignore its profound implications. Let us look a bit more closely at the problem of will as it continually engaged Trilling's thinking. We observed in Chapter Two that Trilling's programme for American liberalism was the resuscitation of the individual will which had been abnegated in deference to the powerful revolutionary will. We saw further how this renovation was to be purely social and pragmatic, not religious, visionary or apocalyptic.

But Trilling was also to speak, and speak rather approvingly, especially in his later essays, of the transcending of the will, even of the cessation of the will or of its abnegation. He refers in appreciation to E.M. Forster's refusal to be great, to "his belief in the
relaxed will," his "deep suspiciousness of the rigid exercise of the intellect." Trilling cites the immense relief that Forster found during the first World War from Huysman's *À Rebours*—the relief of "a world which lived for its sensations and ignored the will." Trilling also expresses agreement with Forster's view that Arnold the poet props us in these bad days because Arnold's poetry can remind us of a world where will is not everything and "can suggest the ideal life of man." In the course of his defence of *Mansfield Park* (in which novel he sees a more profound irony than that found in Jane Austen's other novels), Trilling makes the curious observation that Lady Bertram, "rich and fat and smooth and dull . . . a creature of habit and an object of ritual deference," speaks to our secret inexpressible hopes of "the bliss of being able to remain unconscious of the demands of personality." The surprising sympathy he discovered in his students for Jane Austen he attributes to the fact that the world of Jane Austen is characterized by spaces and objects whose magnitude

1Trilling, *EMF*, p. 155.

2Ibid., p. 146.

3Trilling, *MA*, p. xi.

"overawes and quiets the will."\(^5\)

Let us note a few other facts also before we draw some conclusions regarding this aspect of Trilling's development. If we understand humanism to be "the cult of reason, from Socrates to Freud,\(^6\) we must say that humanism has taken considerable battering in the twentieth century, thanks, for instance, to the violence of the campus riots\(^7\) and the madness-is-health theories of some sections of psychoanalysts. But what is relevant to us here is the distrust that Trilling himself came to entertain for a life of pure reason. The writings of Howells, Jane Austen, Keats, Wordsworth, Orwell (all subjects of discussion in The Opposing Self essays) "made him see that pure mental life is a phantasm."\(^8\) Here again is the charm and fascination of Forster's work. For Forster recommends to us "the strange virtue" of "weariness" seeing the human intellect as a "treacherous" force existing in opposition to the life of

\(^5\)Trilling, "Why We Read Jane Austen," in LD, pp. 210-11.


\(^7\)"The Berkeley students were protesting against universities as the transmitters and continuators of the unwanted rationalist tradition" (Kermode, Ibid.)

acceptant calm. Is Trilling then repudiating Arnold's—and his own—hope that Reason should govern the affairs of mankind?

"Acceptance" is in fact behind the insistence on the "conditioned" that runs through the pages of The Opposing Self, an insistence that we may sometimes find annoying. As Chrysostom Kim points out, the term "ineluctable" appears time and again in Trilling, and so does the phrase "the essential immutability of the human condition." This attitude of submission to the "given" certainly seems heretical to the principle of progress, or endless meliorism, that liberal humanism envisages. It may force us to exclaim, "But this is the purest conservatism!" If the weakness of the liberal imagination consisted in conceiving of the nature of man as limitlessly malleable, 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." And what would Arnold, also a liberal humanist, have thought or said about

9Trilling, EMF, pp. 149-50.

10Chrysostom Kim, O.S.B., "Lionel Trilling on 'The Self in its Standing Quarrel with Culture,'" American Benedictine Review, 27 (1976), 343.

the iterative significance attached to "biological reason," "biological determination," or "the irreducible biological fact" which is beyond the reach of any culture and which can criticize the culture?

All this to-and-froing between the renovation of the will and the cessation of the will, and the acceptance of the conditioned, arises, one suspects, out of the steadfast refusal to adopt a positive religious point of view. Such are the compulsions of humanism that one is driven from the horrors of the revolutionary will ultimately to the seductions of the conditioned with the golden mean of the renovated individual will proving ever elusive. Arnold was able to pray that Reason and the Will of God should prevail and to feel no contradiction between the two terms (though he too would have felt Reason to be at odds with Catholic theology if not with Bishop Wilson). Trilling seems to say, "Let reason prevail," and when that fails, as it did fail, "Let the conditioned prevail."

This, then, is as far as humanism can go. That there is a Will the faith in which would give us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can and the wisdom to know the difference. The fundamental detachment from the mess of secular complexities which permits the Christian a deeper insight.
is certainly not beyond the ken of a powerful mind like Trilling's, but there is something which holds him back. Is it perhaps "the pledge to the critical intellect" which he posited as a third alternative to T.S. Eliot's either/or of Catholicism and materialism? But Lady Bertram and the submission to the "given" of biology come dangerously close to the materialism that Eliot had in mind. Trilling deplores Eliot's "hyperaesthesia," his "preference for the apocalyptic subject and the charismatic style," but to take humanity as the highest good is perhaps also ultimately to rest content with humanity's animality. Eliot, for all his dogmatic Catholicism, would seem to have got the problem into right focus: "the humanist has suppressed the divine, and is left with a human element which may quickly descend again to the animal from which he has sought to raise it." This was what the Indian scriptures also had in view when they spoke of the need

\[\text{than the humanist also allows him to outstrip the humanist on his own territory}^{13}\] (Terry Eagleton, "Reluctant Heroes: The Novels of Graham Greene," in \textit{Exiles and Emigrés: Studies in Modern Literature} (London: Chatto and Windus, 1970); p. 109).

\[\text{Trilling, "Wordsworth and the Rabbis," in OS, p. 148.}\]

to transcend the human will. 15

But it would be inaccurate to say that there is no suggestion of religious awareness in Trilling. His attitude to death is quite pertinent to our present discussion. Christopher Ricks noted in his obituary entitled "Lionel Trilling and Death" how "again and again Trilling's criticism seizes something about death as the salient point

15 See the end of Chapter Three above. Even on the matter of the realization of ideals like liberty, equality, and fraternity--ideals which we are apt to think purely political--the Indian seers' point of view is valuable and valid. It takes fullest note of the inherent contradictions in a political pursuit of these ideals. "A society that pursues liberty as its ideal is unable to achieve equality; a society that aims at equality will be obliged to sacrifice liberty. For the ego to speak of fraternity is for it to speak of something contrary to its nature... Yet is brotherhood the real key... a brotherhood that exists only in the soul and by the soul... this brotherhood is not a matter either of physical kinship or of vital association or of intellectual agreement. When the soul claims freedom, it is the freedom of its self-development, the self-development of the divine in man in all his being. When it claims equality what it is claiming is that freedom equally for all and the recognition of the same soul, the same godhead in all human beings. When it strives for brotherhood, it is founding that equal freedom of self-development on a common aim, a common life, a unity of mind and feeling founded upon the recognition of this inner spiritual unity... It is the practical recognition of this truth, it is the awakening of the soul in man and the attempt to get him to live from his soul and not from his ego which is the inner meaning of religion, and it is that to which the religion of humanity also must arrive before it can fulfil itself in the life of the race" (Sri Aurobindo, "Ideal of Human Unity," Collected Works, Centenary Library Edition, XV (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1971), pp. 546-47).
which our minds must walk all round." Trilling of course objected to a morbid fascination with death ("We are in love, at least in our literature, with the fantasy of death"; but neither did he approve of the liberal's fear of the very mention of death. He repeatedly quoted Forster's aphorism "Death destroys a man, but the idea of death saves him." It is also significant that a large number of the selections in the Experience of Literature anthologies deal profoundly with death. He notes, for example, how Tolstoi's unflinching contemplation of death leads him—and us—to the Christian conclusion that "without life there cannot be a spiritual life, without the capacity for joy or delight there cannot be the conception of the happiness of salvation."

Apart from this healthy preoccupation with death, there are also other indications that Trilling was not as hostile to the religious mode of apprehension as, say, a liberal humanist like E.M. Forster. In the late forties

16 Christopher Ricks, "Lionel Trilling and Death," Listener, 27 Nov. 1975, p. 727.


18 For example in EMF, p. 38.

19 Trilling, "The Death of Ivan Ilych," in Prefaces, p. 87.
Trilling's attack on liberalism was taken to be an attack on the values of the Enlightenment itself, and he was sternly told by scandalized fellow-liberals that he was "ripe to declare for religion." While Trilling emphasized that he was not drawn towards electing religion, he did admit that he did not regard the religious alternative with horror. The intense seriousness of the invocation at the end of Sincerity and Authenticity shows a profound anxiety to preserve the pure religious awareness as against the perversions of Dr Laing and his collaborators. Dickens' Little Dorrit appeals to Trilling because the whole energy of its imagination is directed to "the transcending of the personal will, to the search for the Will in which shall be our peace." The essay on Little Dorrit ends by noticing the slight stature of the heroine of the novel:

Even the physical littleness of this grown woman, an attribute which is insisted on and which seems likely to repel us, does not do so, for we perceive it to be the sign that she is not only the child of the Marshalsea, as she is called, but also the Child of the Parable, the negation of the social will.

22 Trilling, "Little Dorrit," in OS, p. 64.
23 Ibid., p. 65.
Is Trilling saying, then, "In His Will is our peace?"
Matthew Arnold insisted that our highest duty was to make
Reason and the Will of God prevail. At any rate Trilling,
an Arnoldian, would appear to regard the religious alter­
native with less horror than did the humanist E.M. Forster
who asserted, "Lord, I disbelieve--Help thou my Unbelief."\textsuperscript{24}

* * *

We saw in Chapter Three that the concept of class
"aliens" that Arnold posited as essential to culture is
not dissimilar to Trilling's idea of the self in its
standing quarrel with the general culture. (The word
"culture" is, of course, used in two different senses
in this last sentence.) One gets the feeling that Arnold
did not carry this idea further, did not, for instance,
stretch it to speak of the individual repudiating society,
because he felt that this was not what England needed
then. What England needed, in his opinion, was centra­
lity, order and control. What England needed was some
awareness of society, of State, of the nation in its
collective and corporate character. (See especially
"Porro Unum Est Necessarium," the fifth chapter in
\textbf{Culture and Anarchy}.) What the liberal reading public

\textsuperscript{24}E.M. Forster, "What I Believe," in \textbf{Two Cheers for
Democracy}, p. 77.
of America needed, in the thirties and forties of this century, according to Trilling, was a sense of sturdy selfhood as distinct from the general culture. Now this sense of selfhood was not of course anything new that Trilling recommended. He discovered it in such men as Keats, Flaubert, Freud and Arnold, and he recommended it as making for the health of both the individual and the society.

But the assertion of selfhood in these great writers was also balanced by a lively sense of society, an awareness of its presence and pressure. He had this balance in mind when he spoke in glowing terms of Freud's conception of "the self submitting to culture and being yet in opposition to it." Unfortunately, the modern movements in authenticity did not observe this delicate compromise. He found in fact that the excessive importance authenticity had acquired had done harm at various levels:

(1) It had utterly repudiated the conditioned nature of our lives conceiving as it did of life as pure spirit. It had thus lost the knowledge of one term of the dialectic that is always going on between matter and spirit.

(2) It had led to a devaluation of all moderate sentiments accepting none but the most extreme of emotions. "We are

not easy with the quiet men, the civil personalities," he noted with sadness, "the very word civil, except as applied to disobedience or disorder, is uncomfortable in our ears." Now there was in Trilling the New York intellectual, as there was in Matthew Arnold the son of Dr Thomas Arnold, a deep distrust of extreme emotions. In fact we may go a step further and say that both Matthew Arnold and Lionel Trilling value emotion but distrust it. But Trilling has a less personal objection to the phenomenon: "the devaluation of the moderate sentiments brings a concomitant devaluation of the extreme passions."  

(3) The cult of authenticity had resulted in the repudiation of reason and the critical intellect, nay in the apotheosis of madness as the healthiest condition possible to mankind. Trilling is so outraged by this perversion of the notion of authenticity that he declares it beneath argumentative refutation. (4) One is tempted to observe that Trilling as a metropolitan intellectual must have been shocked and revolted by all the stripping and baring and the plumbing into souls and bodies and the spitting out of the most repulsive sensations and sentiments in the name of authenticity. One wonders whether

26 Trilling, "William Dean Howells," in OS, p. 103.

27 Ibid.
this was perhaps the reason why he turned more and more to less aggressive, less "charismatic" writers like Jane Austen, Howells and Wordsworth. (5) Around the worship of authenticity there had grown a secondary environment or sub-culture which had become as unreasonable and tyrannical in its demands upon its members as the general culture itself was. Worse still, the formation of such groups had made nonsense of the very concept of autonomy: for the commitment was no longer to something within but to something outside one's self. The question no longer was, "Is it true, is it true to me?" but "Is it true, is it true to us?" And because authenticity had become unionized, it had also come to attach importance to cheap external manifestations such as faded denims and long hair.

(6) Authenticity had resulted in the blind acceptance of the doctrine of alienation which had lost most of its meaning and urgency. In such a situation, Trilling felt, like Arnold, that it was the function of criticism to make new ideas available to the literary imagination.

(7) Last but most important, authenticity had come to sanctify the utter rejection of society itself. Now Trilling is in nothing else so much like Arnold as in his insistence on a proper relationship between the individual and society. "Civilization," Arnold had said, "is the
humanization of man in society." The perfection that
Arnold untiringly advocated could not be arrived at with­
out civil society. Trilling had noted, in his biography
of Arnold, that the great truth that Arnold was ever to
keep before him was that "all human values, all human
emotions, are of social growth, if not of social origin." And how were these values ever to be realized if society
itself was set at naught?

Here once again Trilling's position is a centrist
one with a sustained tension obtaining between the indivi­
dual and external authority. and such a position is the
more remarkable for being held at a time like ours. As
Tony Tanner puts it, "In a society which preaches uncri­
tical adjustment Trilling wants to keep alive the idea,
not necessarily of anarchic rebellion or flight, but of
critical resistance." Once again the critical intellect
plays a mediatory role. Trilling said that Freud "put his
'rational voice' at the service of impulse, seeking its
liberation," Perhaps we may say Trilling himself put

29 Trilling, MA, p. 113.
31 Trilling, "In Memory of Sigmund Freud," in Prefaces, p. 294.
his rational voice at the service of the opposing self
taking care that the voice ever remained rational. Malcolm
Bradbury describes Trilling's position accurately:

he made the claim for a sane, a culturally central
Romanticism, liberal in cast, which understood the
apocalyptic and the adversary but was not drawn in
beyond sanity. . . . it was drawn by that opposing
element which prevents us from dying in submission
to our culture, yet valued the capacity of reason
to mediate between self and culture. 32

One more thing needs to be said before we pass from
the subject of authenticity. The very essence of authen-
ticity is that it conceives of the self as existing apart
from the general culture, as drawing no sustenance, as
needing no sustenance, from that culture or from other
selves. Trilling noted sadly in one of his later essays
that in contemporary American culture and education the
shaping of the self is held highly undesirable. To shape
a self means limiting it and denying it freedom and shut-
ting off other possibilities. Such a limitation of per-
sonal perspective "goes against the cultural grain." 33

32 Malcolm Bradbury, "Lionel Trilling: End of the

33 Trilling, "The Uncertain Future of the Humanistic
Educational Ideal," in LD, p. 175. Trilling notes, with
his characteristic precision and cultural and semantic
perspicacity, how in America, the use of the word pupil,
to describe a person above twelve, is forbidden in that
it "denies the autonomy made manifest in the word
student" (Ibid., p. 172) and how the German word for
But Trilling himself believed that such a shaping of the self was not only possible but desirable. This was one of the many attractions of the world of Jane Austen—that it suggested the idyllic possibility of the active formation of character and growth in knowledge under another person's care and guidance. Trilling does not view such an act of shaping "as inimical to one's freedom."\[34\] In fact, as Eugene Goodheart suggests,

The tradition that Trilling superbly exemplified during his entire career associates the very idea of shaping with moral freedom. The belief common to the work of Carlyle, Ruskin, and Arnold is that criticism (the great force of culture and education) has the moral or curative power to bring about benign change in the character and quality of individual and social life. The root of this belief does not lie in political ideology, but in the religious idea—that is, in a version of the religious idea of which literature is a natural expression. It is a version inspired by the long Protestant experience of England.\[35\]

It is a measure of the dialectic that ever went on in Trilling's mind that he could entertain a view so heretical to the ideal of authenticity.

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education, Bildung, has a variety of meanings "development, growth, generation, cultivation, culture, fashioning, forming, shaping, etc." (Ibid., p. 171).


\[35\] Ibid.
"More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us," wrote Arnold stating his conviction that with the decline of religion poetry will take on its spiritual function. Now Trilling was to attach a similar importance to the novel. He especially conceived of the novel as eminently fitted to carry out the main task of the liberal imagination: to recapture the primal liberal impulse in all its variousness and complexity. But as the years went by his faith in the interpretative power of literature was shaken. For one thing, art in general was turning away from beauty, man and society. Even in The Liberal Imagination he had acknowledged the truth of Ortega y Gasset's observation that modern art expresses a dislike of holding in the mind the human fact and the human condition, that it shows "a real loathing of living forms and living beings," a disgust with the "rounded and soft forms of living bodies"; and that together with this revulsion, or expressed by it, we find a disgust with history and society and the state.

Trilling's dissatisfaction became more pronounced, less qualified, during the fifties and sixties. He was increasingly disturbed by the whole "abyss" tendency of modernist


literature. Moreover, he was not disposed to regard the attitudes of modern literature as merely symbolic; he was well aware of the literature’s intentionality and its capacity for doing damage. As Steven Marcus notes,

He experienced the radical negativity of some of the most characteristic modernist art and thought, such as Beckett’s writings and certain forms of existential philosophy, with uneasiness, ambivalence, and, finally . . . with downright dislike.  

He felt uneasy with the blind adherence to the doctrine of alienation and with the paradoxical emergence of a culture around it. He was saddened by the irresponsibility of both writers and critics in the new environment. And he was constrained to utter the ultimate heresy that “art does not always tell the truth or the best kind of truth and does not always point out the right way and . . . it might well be subject to the scrutiny of the rational intellect.” Once again it is to the rational intellect that he looked for help in standing beyond culture, beyond any culture, general or secondary. This trusting to the critical intellect for providing sustenance is of course typical of an Arnoldian. But yet, as David Kubal points out,

38 Steven Marcus, “The Liberal Imagination,” in American Review, 21, No. 4 (Summer 1977), 52.

39 Trilling, “Preface” to BG, p. xvii.
between Arnold and Trilling there remained a crucial difference: for the former, the mind was at last conceived of as the handmaiden to poetry, whereas for the latter, it became the primary means to knowledge with art assuming other important but lesser functions.¹⁰

But Trilling of course did not repudiate all literature or doubt literature's essentially moral function. He turned more and more to writers who performed more directly, more unambiguously, literature's moral function of "showing the right way," of preserving "the sentiment of being," of safeguarding the integrity of the self, of asserting moral imperatives. Though he noted frankly that Mansfield Park, with its "restrictive moralism," is "likely to be a distressing work" for readers of our time, he found "a curious power of comfort" in its insistence on the categorical mode of judgment as opposed to the dialectical.¹¹ He would even go back on his earlier judgment of James Agee's work saying that Agee's inability to see people as anything but good arises from a passionate will to deny evil and to

¹⁰David Kubal, "Lionel Trilling: The Mind and Its Discontents," Hudson Review, 31 (Summer 1978), 290. We should perhaps say that to Arnold mind even in its highest reaches is valuable only in so far as it is a transparent medium to higher intuitions. Trilling would consider mind in its perfected state as the highest good and as capable of judging culture.

affirm that "the human soul could exist in a state of radical innocence." 42

* * *

Enough perhaps of tensions and dilemmas. It is time to conclude by briefly noticing the achievement of Trilling as a critic; and in all that we shall say now the Arnoldian heritage is evident. "He established criticism as an intellectual discipline among the people of two nations and set its best tone," wrote Trilling about Matthew Arnold. 43 That Trilling has successfully continued Arnold's job is testified by the fact that he is one of the very few critics to be equally respected on both sides of the Atlantic. We shall return to this point presently but we may say here that Trilling has achieved this fame by conceiving of criticism in a comprehensive way. As Robert Boyers puts it,

it is perhaps most appropriate to think of Trilling as having enlarged the possibilities of literary criticism to accommodate almost any subject--provided only that it be framed to meet the terms of a focused and largely thematic enquiry. 44


43 Trilling, "Introduction" to EMA, p. 3.

It has however been one of the purposes of the present dissertation to show that, in thus pushing back the frontiers of criticism, Trilling, like Arnold, was making a constant endeavour to seek out the best that has been known and thought. This attempt took him beyond what is generally regarded as literature into such fields as literary biography (See the fine essay "Profession: Man of the World," on Richard Monckton Milnes, one of the lesser known Victorian figures, in A Gathering of Fugitives), psychoanalysis, philosophy (e.g. the excursions into Hegel, Schiller, Diderot, Burke in Sincerity and Authenticity), sociology (witness the enthusiastic "Notes" on David Riesman in whom he found the "intrusive curiosity that is the mark of the classic novelist,"\textsuperscript{45} a curiosity that was less manifest in the contemporary novelists themselves), and of course politics. This fact also accounts for his high reputation among men of other disciplines. Even Roger Sale who charged Trilling with the impulse "to be masterful, to make sermons, to have disciples,"\textsuperscript{46} had to admit that Trilling was perhaps the only critic frequently read by historians, philosophers,

\textsuperscript{45} Trilling, "Two Notes on David Riesman," in AGF, p. 93.

\textsuperscript{46} Roger Sale, "Lionel Trilling," Hudson Review, 26 (Spring 1973), 246.
social and natural scientists. And though Trilling was ever on guard against complacency, it would not have surprised him that a critic—a literary critic—should be the object or subject of such wide attention. For he was convinced of the critic's public role and institutional responsibility.

As for literary criticism itself, he has first of all pleaded the case for criticism, refuting the view that criticism, any criticism, is an interference with the reader's spontaneous response. He has maintained that "an actual response to art . . . depends on discourse—not upon any one kind of discourse, but upon discourse of some kind." And then at a time—the thirties and forties especially—when the critical act was itself being narrowly conceived, he reminded critics of the wider contexts in which literature exists and of the larger concerns to which it addresses itself. He refused

47 "I am always surprised," he said at a seminar on his own criticism, "when I hear myself referred to as a critic." The reason for the surprise was that "I did not ever undertake to be a critic—being a critic was not, in Wordsworth's phrase, part of the plan that pleased my boyish thought, or my adolescent thought, or even my thought as a young man." He had rather envisaged for himself the career of a novelist ("Some Notes for an Autobiographical Lecture," in LD, p. 227).

to believe that there is such a thing as "pure" literary criticism. Norman Podhoretz succinctly states Trilling's merits vis-a-vis the scholars, the New Critics and the Marxists:

He brings together scholarship commensurate with that of the old literary historians, an analytic subtlety comparable to Brooks', and a sense of the all-important interplay between literature and society that successfully counters the stigmatized Marxist approach. It will perhaps be seen a bit more clearly, then, why he has so solid a claim to the Arnoldian title in the American context.

Next, he has consistently emphasized the moral nature and function of literature at a time when literary criticism tended to be concerned exclusively with problems of technique. He continually reminded the aesthetes of literature's "nasty unaesthetic tendency to insist upon some degree of immediate practicality":

Literature doesn't easily submit to the category of aesthetic contemplative disinterestedness—so much of it insists "De TE fabula—this means you," and often goes on to say, "And you'd better do something about it quick."

Here his position is clearly with another Arnoldian, F.R. Leavis, who demands of art that it react to experience


with commitment and intelligence. Yet Leavis' insistence on what he considers **sacred** in literature leaves him no room for what is gratuitous in it, "for the impulse of sheer **performance**, even of **virtuosity**" which is of "enormous human significance." His insistence on what is **great**—and we may feel that his criteria for greatness are not unexceptionable anyway—shuts him off from a host of secondary figures. In Trilling's mansion, on the other hand, there is room for C.P. Snow as well as Joyce, Robert Graves as well as Yeats, Tess Slesinger as well as Jane Austen. Perhaps the best proof of Trilling's inclusive sensibility is his capacity for responding to both E.M. Forster and the modernist writers. In this freedom from literary exclusiveness, in catholicity of taste, as in the combination of sensibility with a sense of fact, Trilling also demonstrates his superiority to the New Critics. Trilling is also evidently uncomfortable with Arnold's roll call of honour among poets. In fact, Edmund Wilson's unorthodox "voracity for print" makes

51 Trilling, "Dr Leavis and the Moral Tradition," in AGF, pp. 104-105. "His conception of literature as the *sacred milieu* leaves him without resources when literature becomes profane" (Eugene Goodheart, The Failure of Criticism, p. 78).

52 "Surely literature has become dogma when it becomes as important to grade writers as to make a scriptural canon" (Trilling, MA, p. 379).
a strong appeal to Trilling; even Saintsbury's response to literature, though it lacks ideas and an interest in ideas, is to be admired for like Edmund Wilson's critical work,

it affirms the swarming, multitudinous democracy of letters, and testifies to the rightness of loving civilization and culture in and for themselves and of taking pleasure in human communication almost for its own sake and of the order and peace in which we may listen to each other and have time and generosity enough to listen even to those who do not succeed in saying the absolutely best things.\(^{53}\)

Perhaps Trilling's finest achievement is as a cultural historian, the critical chronicler of the moral consciousness of Americans in particular and of twentieth-century Westerners in general. He believed in the inseparability of literature and the general culture and he attended to even the subtlest reports from both so that he could perceive the right relationships. As we argued in Chapter Six, we can say of Trilling, as Trilling said of Arnold, that behind every critical judgment of literature that Trilling makes there lies a social and political judgment. In his search for cultural patterns Trilling did not shrink from making wide

\(^{53}\) Trilling, "Edmund Wilson," in *AGF*, pp. 54-55.
generalizations. He is especially interested in what we read and in what we read of ourselves in what we read. The title of his last essay, "Why We Read Jane Austen," might well have been given to any or all of his other essays and books: "Why We Read Matthew Arnold," "Why We Read The Princess Casamassima," and so on. In other words, behind his concern with literary culture lay a concern with the general culture and a concern for a higher culture as the pursuit of perfection. It is in this sense that, as Norman Podhoretz says, Arnold "exerted the most fertilizing kind of influence on his biographer":

For the thing to remember about Arnold is that his real importance lay in the large purpose which coursed through the whole of his work, expressing itself in terms of a committed response to the problems of his age. So that a properly Arnoldian critic is one who places himself in a certain relation to his immediate cultural environment and maintains his position of vigilance through the years.  

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"The difficulty for democracy," wrote Matthew Arnold, "is, how to find and keep high ideals." In the absence of

54 "Trilling was a man bent on getting at the significance of things and in this he was perfectly willing to yield a little by way of particularity if he might thereby discover the symptomatic status of the recalcitrant object" (Robert Boyers, Lionel Trilling, p. 3).

an aristocracy, he asked, "who or what will give a high tone to the nation?" Trilling has, directly or indirectly, posed such a question throughout his critical career. Arnold's answer was: the State. The State, governed by the "aliens," the nation in its corporate character, should set the ideals and the tone for the people. The panacea does not seem to have worked in our times. Arnold said that "Unprejudiced intelligence . . . equitable moderation" could not come from below; they could come only from the State. The twentieth century's experiences in entrusting the job to the State have not been very happy. After all it was the claim of Communist Russia and the Stalinist liberals in America that the Soviet government represented the best self, the general will, of the Soviet people, perhaps even of all humanity. Arnold's problem, Trilling's problem, our problem, is "how to place power and reason in the same agent, or how to make power reasonable, or how to endow reason with power." To be sure, Trilling has not solved the problem, indeed the problem is incapable of a permanent solution, but it is Trilling's greatness that

58 Trilling, MA, p. 253.
he states the problem in all its complexity. Here in Russia was the rationalist Utopia that idealists and ideologists had dreamed of. And yet "what we took to be a political pastoral was really a grim military campaign or a murderous betrayal of political allies."\(^59\) Not that Trilling was unaware of the insidious forms coercion might take in a capitalist democracy like America.

Living as he did in the age of Gradgrinds and Bounderby's, Arnold was genuinely exercised about the divorce between culture and character and over the mistaken notion that culture was a mere varnish, that only character deserved serious attention:

No error can be more fatal. Culture without character is, no doubt, something frivolous, vain and weak; but character without culture is, on the other hand, something raw, blind, and dangerous.\(^60\)

Well, Trilling in turn lived in the world of Stalin, "Che" Guevara and a host of other revolutionaries for whom anything that didn't forward the revolutionary purpose was frivolous and bourgeois. Hence the importance, Trilling declared, of a work like The Princess Casamassima whose hero finds that his mind is enlarged by contemplating

\(^59\)Trilling, "George Orwell," in OS, p. 152.

the monuments of a culture now decadent even as his social conscience is shocked by the injustices that that culture has perpetrated. Such a perfect equilibrium Trilling found commendable.

And then Trilling has constantly endeavoured to unite politics with imagination. Starting from the French Revolution, politics has increasingly tended to break loose from imagination and sought to justify itself in and through abstractions. It is once again proof of Trilling's Arnoldian, we might say Romantic, heritage that he has resisted the dissociation between politics and imagination. It is for the fusion that Orwell achieved between his political ideas and his imagination that he receives Trilling's praise. Writing on the occasion of the completion of ten years by Partisan Review, Trilling said that the magazine had striven "to organize a new union between our political ideas and our imagination" and he added that "in all our cultural purview there is no work more necessary."61 Of the essays of The Liberal Imagination and their author it can be justly said that they have striven to do precisely this, that they represent "the impulse to insist that the activity of politics be united with the

imagination under the aspect of mind."\(^\text{62}\)

* * *

But we value Trilling not only for what he did but also for what he was. Trilling often regretted the fact that there have been no literary "figures" in America since Mark Twain—"men who live their vision as well as write them, who are what they write."\(^\text{63}\) Trilling himself, though he wouldn't have liked to admit it, became such a figure, known and respected in America, England and elsewhere. An important reason for this, of course, was his cosmopolitanism—his transcending religious and national barriers. Anti-semitism, he said, was a "vulgarity,"\(^\text{64}\) and he did not say this because he was a Jew. So was nationalism if by nationalism is meant the notion that "there is an intrinsic and nearly exclusive rightness in one's land, literature and language."\(^\text{65}\) When we speak

\(^\text{62}\)Ibid., p. 112. L.C. Knights, in his *Public Voices*, cites the essay ("The Function of the Little Magazine") as highly relevant to his own argument which is "to suggest the importance of literature and the study and enjoyment of literature for the health of our political life" (L.C. Knights, *Public Voices*, p. 112 and p. 11).

\(^\text{63}\)Trilling, "George Orwell," in *OS*, p. 155.


\(^\text{65}\)Trilling, Contribution to "The Situation in American Writing: Seven Questions (Part Two)," *Partisan Review*, 6 (Fall 1939), 109.
of his cosmopolitanism we mean of course also his courtesy, the charm and grace of his presence which somehow made themselves felt in all that he wrote. But above all we mean his commitment to something larger than America, to what is known as the European tradition and culture. Perhaps there is no such thing as Western culture.

Perhaps it can be said that men like Trilling (and there are too few of them) have created western culture, for only in their minds does it lie as an ordered whole. But at least in looking on it as an ordered whole he is not looking back on it in Alexandrian fashion to order and entomb; it all lives for him, vibrant with both moral and aesthetic reality; it is part of a present, or perhaps of a timeless, order, an order that is always relevant, however much one needs a sense of the past to understand it. 66

We venerate Trilling for the unified sensibility he achieved, a unified sensibility "whose general absence our culture has persistently bemoaned through all the years of this century." 67 For, as Robert Boyers suggests, the negative capability that Trilling showed is "an achievement of sensibility, not an ideological stance." 68

Trilling belongs with those men who in large measure

68 Ibid., p. 44.
contain the dialectic, the yes and the no, of their culture within themselves, who can hold two opposed ideas in suspension in the mind and still retain the ability to function. His criticism is a record of the dialectic that ever went on in his mind. In this sense his criticism achieves the status of a creative work. We may extend Yeats's aphorism and say that with our quarrels with ourselves we make not only poetry but first-rate criticism. 69

He represented, like Matthew Arnold, the struggle between action and ideas, a struggle which many of us have fortunately never had or have solved very easily. He tried to show that the co-existence of two ideas need not keep us from acting on either, that thought itself is a kind of action, that it is not necessarily wrong to take sides but to believe that the taking of sides settles things. And then he had the hallmark of the critical spirit--patience and endurance. Time and again has he had to say to himself and to others, including perhaps Jews, who wanted to settle things for good and all:

This is not Jerusalem. Jerusalem is not yet. Your present spirit is not Jerusalem, is not the goal you have to reach, the place you may be satisfied in. 70

69Irving Howe, "Reading Lionel Trilling," Commentary, 56 (August 1973), 68.

70The words of course are Matthew Arnold's. See "A French Eton," in Super, II, 320.
And when we think of him we think inevitably of the charm and elegance of his prose. It was a prose which transcended differences between the British and the American varieties, between the British and the American tones. It was the tone of a civilized mind talking of civilizing things. It was the language of a mind in quest of truth. Once again Matthew Arnold seems to have set the right tone and the right attitude:

To try and approach truth on one side after another, not to strive or cry, nor to persist in pressing forward, on any one side, with violence and self-will—-it is only thus, it seems to me, that mortals may hope to gain any vision of the mysterious Goddess.\(^7^1\)

It was also a prose that suggested the lucidest possibilities of the English language. If we may borrow the phrase which Trilling used to speak about his friend Elliot Cohen, we may say that Trilling's own prose demonstrates his belief in "the communicability of virtually all ideas," that it is "the expression of his passionate democracy."\(^7^2\)

More than everything else, Lionel Trilling represented, so cogently, so earnestly, the life of the mind—mind in all

\(^7^1\)Arnold, "Preface" to *Essays in Criticism*, p. 3.

Its struggles and patience, with all its energy, its spiritedness and delight. As we found it at work in this man, mind did not seem a poor grey thing after all. And there is no greater tribute that we can pay him than to ask, with the British poet Robert Conquest:

What weaker disciplines shall bind,
What lesser doctors now protect,
The sweetness of the intellect,
The honey of the hive of mind?  