"Grant me patience, just heaven," cried Tristram Shandy in an agony, "Grant me patience, just heaven, of all the cants which are canted by the canting world—though the cant of hypocrites may be the worse—the cant of criticism is the worst tormenting." Time was when Iago could boast that he was nothing if not critical. We in the twentieth century have evolved a sophisticated view, a way of being critical of criticism, judging the judgment of literature. We have, as Helen Gardner complains, "considerations of Mr X's modifications of Mr Y's criticism of Mr Z's article on—shall we say Measure for Measure, or Marvell's 'The Garden'?" Criticism has indeed become a large-scale industry often requiring little more than industry in the other sense of the term.

The creative writer's resentment at all this gratuitous attention is understandable, especially when it is...

not complimentary. This was perhaps what provoked Wordsworth to call the critical power "infinitely lower than the inventive" and the act of criticism an "inglorious employment." Matthew Arnold, while admitting that the critical power is of lower rank than the inventive, nevertheless insisted that criticism, when conceived and executed properly, can give the same sense of happiness and fulfilment as that afforded by creative writing; secondly, the conditions requisite for a literary creation may not always obtain; and it is then the duty of criticism to make those conditions prevail. It is, for instance, the duty of the critic to create a current of ideas in which literary creation will become possible.²

Among our New Apologists for Criticism Lionel Trilling holds a significant place. Like Arnold he conceives of the life of the literary critic—"literary," as we shall see, in the widest sense—as a pre-eminently intellectual and social life. Trilling's defence of literary criticism, however, is addressed to the reader who, suffering from a surfeit of critical "introductions," "readings" and "approaches," might want to be left alone to taste the pleasures of

reading by himself. For, he may complain, criticism makes his response less personal and less sincere. Trilling's reply is that the literary experience is of its very nature "communal—it asks to be shared in discourse." What is more important to Trilling, "discourse leads to dialectic," and dialectic increases "the interest and pleasure of the private experience."  

Trilling speaks, in the introduction to his anthology of literary criticism, of "the natural amity" between literature and the criticism of literature. It is necessary to speak of this amity because there is the opinion—"it never prevails but neither does it wholly die"—that criticism is by its very nature an activity of the intellect and is therefore alien to the art of creation which directs itself to the feelings; and that criticism, though professing to serve literature, betrays it by interfering with its proper function and "diminishing the immediacy" with which, if left to itself, literature can affect the reader. There are occasions when the "ineptness or officiousness"

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of a particular piece of criticism makes this true:

The mood of a moment may make it true for the moment--there are times when criticism seems beside the point of literature and it is literature beyond the reach of criticism that we want, just as there are times when literature itself seems beside the point of life and it is life itself beyond the reach of literature that we want.

But, "it is not true in principle." That it is not true many poets have shown by being themselves practitioners, often distinguished ones, of the art of criticism.⁴

There is another justification that Trilling would offer to his Arnoldian preoccupation with and practice of criticism. Northrop Frye, asserting that art cannot do without criticism, puts the matter first somewhat bluntly when he says that the popularity of Shakespeare and Keats--shall we add Donne also--now is "equally the result of the publicity of criticism." But Frye goes on to say that "a public that tries to do without criticism, and asserts that it knows what it wants or likes, brutalizes the arts and loses its cultural memory. Art for art's sake is a retreat from criticism which ends in an impoverishment of civilized

While Trilling as an Arnoldian would agree that criticism is an indispensable part of the civilized life, he would justify criticism even from a purely "aesthetic" point of view. The various critical opinions that have been expressed from time to time—including those judgments which we would now regard as "wrong," e.g. Dr Johnson's condemnation of "Lycidas" or his adverse remarks on the Metaphysicals—have become, for many readers, "part of the existence of the works to which they were directed":

They are kept in mind because they are, in all that we now think their wrongness, an aid to understanding: these judgments are made on premises so forthrightly stated that they have the effect both of stimulating and of organizing our controversy of them, of shaping the view that we think right.

The real poem is not only the poem that the author consciously intended and his first readers read, not only what we now perceive, but the poem is also "the poem as it has existed in history, as it has lived its life from Then to Now, as it is a thing which submits itself to one kind of perception in one age and another kind of perception in another age, as it exerts in each age a different kind of

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6 Trilling, *LG*, p. 18.
power."? After all, a work of art does not exist in a kind of static perfection but lives in the minds of its readers. It goes through a series of avatars as it were. That is why a variorum edition has importance. It gives us the realization of the many things the work has meant and been. This fact also accounts for the ultimate mystery of the work of art which is also one of its aesthetic elements.

We understand why Trilling frequently returns to the critical history of each work or author that he undertakes to study.

If, then, criticism has not only a respectable status but a noble and indispensable one as well, what kind of criticism should it be? The 1930's, the time when Lionel Trilling's career began, witnessed a lively quarrel between the "scholars" and the "critics." The issue is by no means dead today though not as intense as during that decade. The "critics" at the beginning were "a small partisan guerilla band" whereas the "scholars" were an entrenched force.\(^7\) The critics intensified the assault and drove the


\(^8\)Trilling, "Preface" to LC, p. vi.
scholars into the defensive; but even by the sixties there was acknowledgment on the part of the critics of the value of scholarship in developing the sensibility and limiting the range of interpretation. However, when we study Lionel Trilling's criticism, we would do well to bear in mind the situation of the 1930's and 1940's.

The critics' position, in brief, was this: the work of art has an autonomous existence and our approach to the work of art should therefore be "intrinsic" rather than "extrinsic." The "extrinsic" would include the historical, sociological and biographical approaches. These divert attention from the work itself and prevent the reader from experiencing the work in an unmediated way. The proper approach, that is, the "intrinsic" approach, would then mean the bringing of a sensibility unprejudiced or unencumbered by extraneous knowledge, to the consideration of the verbal structures of the work. Only when studied in this way would the work exercise its full power on us. But the scholars, in their quest for scientifically verifiable facts about the work, made the work of art an object of knowledge rather than an agent of power.  

9"Unmediated" is not used here in the sense in which Geoffrey Hartman or the modern language philosophers like George Steiner use the term.

There is something ironic in the way the work of the critics—perhaps we can switch over to the term "New Critics" since the attack on the scholars was made under the banner of the New Critical Movement—developed. They came to share a fault with the scientific-historical scholars themselves: "they try too hard." They too came to fall into the "great modern illusion 'that anything whatever . . . can be discovered through hard intellectual work and concentration.'" On the contrary, Trilling insists on the ultimate mystery of art. *Emma*, for instance, is "like a person—not to be comprehended fully and finally by any other person."

The New Critics make the elucidation of poetic ambiguity or irony "a kind of intellectual callisthenic ritual." It is also ironic that the movement which warned against interfering with the sensibility of the reader and insisted on the reader's making an unmediated response to the work, itself became hyperactive, too energetic and too brilliant and in its "bright busyness" came to interfere with the


12Ibid.


independence of the reader. It is even more ironic that the Movement which started against the impressionism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, itself resulted in a kind of new impressionism, and made the artifact more mysterious and mystical than it ever was.

But there are more serious objections to be raised to the monistic approach of the New Critics. The New Critics were right to insist on a concentration on the elements of the work of art but they failed to remember—or rather they chose to forget—that the elements of a work of art are not limited to the world of art. "They reach into life," Trilling reminds the New Critics, "and whatever knowledge of them we gain . . . may quicken our feelings for the work itself and even enter legitimately into those feelings." The work of art is indeed an agent of power, but it can exercise its full power, we can feel the full impact of its power, only when we bring certain kinds of knowledge to its study. Trilling points out that "a return to the text must be followed by a fresh departure from the text"

15 T.S. Eliot, in his lecture at the Univ. of Minnesota in 1956. Quoted by Trilling in LC, p. vii.

16 See especially I.A. Richards, "How does a Poem know when it is finished?" in Poetries and Sciences (New York: Norton, 1970).

if the criticism is to come alive. And we all know where the departure leads—into society, and politics, and history."¹⁸ In fact, it is this Arnoldian awareness that primarily distinguishes Trilling from the New Critics: the awareness of the origin, function and appeal of art in their social, cultural, historical and political contexts. We call this "Arnoldian" also because it is this approach that enables the critic to see the literary object as in itself it really is.

The New Critics' revolt against the historical method of criticism was understandable, because the historical critics, more often than not, diverted attention from the work of art to information about the work. Moreover, the historical scholars for the most part "conceived of history as being merely a 'setting' for literary works" and then "tacitly admitted that it is much more interesting to study the setting than the works."¹⁹ The scholars were quite often historians of ideas; Trilling cites Professor Lovejoy who went to the extent of saying, in his The Great Chain of


Being, that "for the study of ideas a really dead writer is better than one whose works are still enjoyed." When we encounter such antiquarianism, "we naturally pull up short and wonder if we are not in danger of becoming like the Edinburgh body-snatchers who saw to it that there were enough cadavers for study in the medical school." The New Critics in great part rescued us from such "antiquarianism and reductionism," but only at the expense of "tearing the literary work out of the historical-cultural context and putting it entirely in ours" (emphasis added).

For in their reaction against the historical method, the New Critics "forget that the literary work is ineluctably a historical fact, and, what is more important, that its historicity is a fact in our aesthetic experience." Literature, says Trilling, is historical in three separate senses. A large part of literature is historical in the sense of being a chronicle recording personal, national and cosmological events. Secondly, literature is historical "in the sense that it is necessarily aware of its own past." This is the sense with which T.S. Eliot is

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23 Ibid., p. 190.
concerned in his "Tradition and the Individual Talent," the awareness of a writer of his own connexion with tradition, such that he feels the relevance of past literature to his own work and situation. A happy example of this consciousness of tradition on the part of the writer is Gray's "The Progress of Poesy" in which we have the evolution of poetry furnishing theme for still further poetry. We may mention here, in passing, another kind of awareness, closely related to the last, which neither Eliot nor Trilling has taken notice of. The creative writer is aware of the past not just as past events but as transformed into imaginative artifacts. The urn matters to Keats precisely because it belongs to the past and also because it contains pictures which belong to the creative work of the past. Even in The Waste Land the awareness of the past is as it is enshrined in literature.

But there is another sense in which literature is historical and it is with this that Trilling is most concerned. "In the existence of every work of literature of the past its historicity, its pastness, is a factor of great importance." This pastness is not something external to the work, it is "a part of the given of the work, which we cannot help but respond to."

In the New Critics' refusal to take critical account of the historicity of a work there is, one understands, the impulse to make the work of the past
more immediate and more real, to deny that between Now and Then there is any essential difference, the spirit of man being one and continuous. But it is only if we are aware of the reality of the past as past that we can feel it as alive and present. If, for example, we try to make Shakespeare literally contemporaneous [as Jan Kott did], we make him monstrous. He is contemporaneous only if we know how much a man of his own age he was; he is relevant to us only if we see his distance from us.\textsuperscript{24}

If, then, Eliot is concerned in his "Tradition" essay with the \textit{presentness of the past}, Trilling is concerned with the \textit{pastness of the past}. Rather, though Eliot would expect of his reader an awareness of the pastness of the past as well as of its presence, in his practice he seems to stress the presentness of the past ignoring its pastness. Trilling would go further and say that it is only when we are aware of the past \textit{as} past that we can understand its presentness. Roy Harvey Pearce calls this view "the New Historicism":

Pastness in a literary work is an aspect—a vital, authentic aspect, a \textit{sine qua non}—of presentness. The work of art may well live forever as the creation of a man like other men before and after him. But an integral part of its life, of its formal quality, will derive from the fact that it was created at a time, and for and of a time. Thus, and only thus, is literature possible. Thus, and only thus, does it become what it is.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{24}Trilling, "The Sense of the Past," in \textit{LI}, pp. 190-91.

Trilling cites the examples of Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode" and The Prelude. The Prelude, "of all works of the Romantic Movement is closest to our present interest." But both it and the "Immortality Ode" are "acceptable to us" only when they are understood to have been written at a certain past moment; if they had appeared much later than they did, if they were now offered to us as contemporary works, we would not admire them. "In the pastness of these works lies the assurance of their validity and relevance."^26

Unfortunately, Trilling does not elaborate these remarks on the "Immortality Ode" and The Prelude but perhaps we may guess what he means. Why should The Prelude "of all works of the Romantic Movement" be "closest to our present interest"? Romantic poetry creates a world of imagination. We don't live or believe in that world any more. In that sense Romantic poetry is away from our interest. But Wordsworth, in The Prelude, is concerned with two things in which we in the twentieth century are also equally interested. He is concerned first with the making of a poet (and his realizing it) in the era after the Industrial Revolution, when Wordsworth himself believed

it was too late. We also wonder now whether it is at all possible to practise the vocation of a poet. Secondly, The Prelude also takes up the question of how far the poet's innermost being, his self or soul is related not only to Nature but to human nature. Wordsworth is here saying something that is not exclusively or typically Romantic. The interest of Shelley, Byron or Scott was mostly in the individual soul vis-a-vis Nature and in both of these against the background of eternity. "They were homesick for eternity." They were not interested in man's social duty to other men. But Wordsworth in The Prelude came to see that Nature was not enough, that man was also needed. Wordsworth realized that he became a full poet only when he became aware of the sins and sufferings of men, "the still sad music of humanity."

But neither The Prelude nor the "Immortality Ode" can now be offered as a contemporary work. The latter poem has a certain ambience of thought—the belief in re-birth and recognition—which we have lost and with which we cannot sympathize. And then both The Prelude and the "Immortality Ode" have two things in common:
(1) They are overwhelming in their concern with external Nature which in Wordsworth is external and not man. Wordsworth does not make it one thing in two. We do not have this concern and we can capture this only by an
effort of the imagination. (2) In both poems Wordsworth takes it for granted that it is a matter of supreme importance that such and such a thing happened to him. He looks upon himself as one of the elect, in the tradition of Milton. With this highly ego-centric, highly Romantic, view, we cannot be expected to sympathize.

But Trilling's point is that we cannot wish away all these differences of outlook and sympathies between ourselves and the past. If we were to collapse that past into our present, we would only be made uncomfortable by such attitudes—and so fail to appreciate what the work of art has to offer. This awareness of the pastness of the past Trilling calls "the historical sense." The New Critics themselves, in discovering "all poetic virtue in the poetry of the seventeenth century" and in finding "the essence of poetic error in the poetry of Romanticism," were only involving their aesthetics with certain cultural preferences. In "showing a preference for a particular period of the past, which they brought into comparison with the present, they were exercising their historical sense." 27

The historical sense is another respect in which Trilling comes closer to Arnold than to the New Critics. Though Matthew Arnold argues effectively against the "historic

estimate," saying that it is "mere literary dilettantism" "to trace the labours, the attempts, the weaknesses, the failures of a genuine classic, to acquaint oneself with his time and his life and his historical relationships," 28 Arnold cannot be considered anti-historical. He was only speaking against tracing genetic factors for their own sake and not against their use in criticism. His limiting definition of the eighteenth century as an age of prose and reason, his references (in "The Function of Criticism") to the Greece of Pericles and Elizabethan England, his frequent and contrasting remarks on the "times of creativity" as opposed to times of criticism—all indicate how much he believed in historical criticism and in judging the literature of an age as, among other things, an expression of the spirit of that age. 29

The historical sense enables us to accept the principle of causation, to perceive a work as implicated in the life of a people at a certain time, "as expressing that life, and as being in part shaped by it." 30 This perception, far from diminishing the power or charm of a work of art, actually enhances it. One of the examples that


30 Trilling, LC, p. 20.
Trilling cites is Molière's *Misanthrope*. The twentieth-century reader has "no difficulty in responding to the question the play asks. Although sincerity is indeed an admirable trait and to be urged on everyone, is it not possible to set excessive store by it?" But there is a strangeness in the large public importance attached to the question in the play. We would hardly take a grave view of the contempt for good manners and the rude behaviour that the hero's overvaluation of sincerity results in. And we can understand the conclusion of the play—that despite all its ignobility, "society must be accepted as a necessary and essentially beneficent circumstance of human existence"—we can understand this only when we realize that this view is part of the effort of men placed in a certain historical situation "to realize the idea of society in terms that were available to them."

This awareness of cultural causation is of course not based on any extrinsic information. But there is an extrinsic circumstance the knowledge of which enhances our sense of the "extent to which the play is implicated in its culture" and so our recognition of "the living will of the play, its energy of intention." That circumstance is the fact that when the play first appeared,

31 Judith Shklar discusses the play from a similar point of view ("Let Us Not Be Hypocritical," *Daedalus*, 108, No. 3 (Summer 1979), 1-25).
it was not very successful, though many thoughtful people held it in high regard. This fact immediately suggests the opposition of one cultural group to another. This also makes clear the work's intention of "affecting the culture by bringing it under a scrutiny which was in some degree adverse."\textsuperscript{32}

If the historical sense is essential it is also important that we keep it properly "complicated."\textsuperscript{33} We are in general right to assume a causal relation between the writer and the general culture of his times. But, as the cultivators of the arts are always few in number, it often happens, says Trilling quoting Hume, that chance or secret unknown causes have great influence on the rise and progress of all refined arts.\textsuperscript{34} This was where the Marxist view differed from other theories of causation. Marx showed a kind of "intransigent confidence in the category of causation." In fact Marx grants no autonomy at all to culture; its nature, according to him, is strictly conditioned; and the conditioning factor is the mode of economic production with which a culture is associated. Trilling

\textsuperscript{32}Trilling, \textit{LC}, pp. 20-22.

\textsuperscript{33}Trilling, "The Sense of the Past," in \textit{LL}, p. 194.

\textsuperscript{34}Ibid., p. 193.
admits that there is a large potential for criticism in the Marxist theory. But Marxist criticism has generally failed because it "seems to be ignorant of the intellectual possibilities of the doctrine to which it gives lip-service and contents itself with a simplistic moralizing about literature; having taken for granted the badness of capitalist society, it conceives its chief enterprise to be the demonstration of how the social turpitude manifests itself in the corruption of the artistic consciousness." 35

Trilling does not also approve of invoking cultural causation to extenuate the shortcomings of a writer. Talking of Theodore Dreiser's "bookish," "literary" style, and of his "intellectual vulgarity"—Dreiser's antisemitism was "not merely a social prejudice but an idea, a way of dealing with difficulties"—Trilling refers to the view that Dreiser was a child of his time, of his class, the "type or model of the artist of plebian origin in America," and says:

That he was a child of his time and class is also true, but this can be said of everyone without exception; the question for criticism is how he transcended the imposed limitations of his time and class. As for the defence made on the ground of his particular class, it can only be said that liberal thought has come to a strange pass when

35 Trilling, LG, pp. 22-23.
it assumes that a plebian origin is accountable for a writer's faults through all his intellectual life.\textsuperscript{36}

Even as no cultural causation, no biography, no psychoanalysis can explain the genius of an artist, these should not be used to defend the shortcomings of his art.

If, then, a work of literature is "not an exception to the conditioned nature of all things"--the idea of "conditioning" is central to Trilling's way of thinking about man's life in culture--the factors conditioning a work of literature are to be found as much in the life of its author, in the circumstances of its composition as in the cultural environment.\textsuperscript{37} Indeed, as Helen Gardner points out, we need this awareness of the work's quiddity as a personal vision of the world, "as a counterpoise to the sense of the work as historically conditioned."\textsuperscript{38} Moreover, if we keep the biography out, there is the danger of endless subjectivism. Professor Garrod calls it mere

\textsuperscript{36}Trilling, "Reality in America," in \textit{LI}, pp. 30-31. We are reminded of Matthew Arnold's censure of Chaucer for lacking "the accent of high seriousness." "It may be said that it was necessarily out of the reach of any poet in the England of that stage of growth. Possibly; but we are to adopt a real, not a historic, estimate of poetry" ("The Study of Poetry," in \textit{Essays in Criticism}, p. 249).

\textsuperscript{37}Trilling, \textit{LC}, p. 25.

"bookishness" to put the poet out of the room when considering the poem. For when we put him out, we let in one of two interlopers: either ourselves, our own personality or notions or those of our times—as an example we may cite Empson's notion of what he called Milton's God. Or we let in a false image of the poet. Garrod instances Fitzgerald's "Daddy Wordsworth"; we may add the bleeding heart that Empson sees in Hopkins.

We shall take up Trilling's use of biography in some detail in the chapter on his applied criticism. We may however notice a few examples here. What was the influence of the Marguerite episode on Matthew Arnold? Arnold was, from the point of view of his own domestic happiness, right to leave Marguerite. "But treating the matter in the realm of poetry, we may say that Arnold, unhappily, was giving up an excellent part of himself". He gave up his youthful self; he gave up his mood of self-pity, "set off . . . by the knowledge of gaiety" which had produced his best poetry. He turned to "knowledge and reason and analysis." But as he progressed in this pursuit "he left poetry behind." 40


Biography may, however, point in one direction but the facts of literary achievement or failure may go against it. We see this in the case of Sherwood Anderson. "At the age of forty-five . . . he found himself the manager of a small paint factory in Elyria, Ohio; one day, in the very middle of a sentence he was dictating, he walked out of the factory and gave himself to literature and truth." This act of courage should have forever protected him against artistic failure. But Anderson seems to have thought, with the naivete of many liberals, that "the problem of the artist was defined wholly by the struggle between sincerity on the one hand and commercialism and gentility on the other." He never understood that the moment of enlightenment and conversion—the walking out—"cannot be merely celebrated but must be developed, so that what begins as an act of will grows to be an act of intelligence." Trilling here makes a highly discriminating and sophisticated use of biography.

In using biography to interpret a writer, we often speak of the influences on him. Here again we should be on our guard against simplifications or literal-mindedness. There are many points, for example, in which Proust might

\[1^1\] Trilling, "Sherwood Anderson," in LI, p. 36.

\[4^2\] Ibid., pp. 38-39.
be supposed to have been "influenced" by Freud—"the investigation of sleep, of sexual deviation, of the way of association, the almost obsessive interest in metaphor." Yet, Trilling reminds us, Proust did not read Freud.43 We should, in other words, distinguish between influence and affinity. Moreover, when using the word "influence," we ought to remember that etymologically it was an astrological image meaning "producing effects by insensible or invisible means."44

Trilling advocates a similar caution and discrimination when dealing with the problem of "intention." As one who believes in the intellectually conscious nature of the artistic activity he certainly would not put the writer's intention out of court. If perhaps he would agree with Wimsatt and Beardsley that the intention of the artist ought not to be taken as a standard by which to judge the work of art, he would certainly not rule out the usefulness of the knowledge of the writer's intention in interpreting the work.45 But Trilling is also aware

45 The problem is not so simple, however, as may be seen from the highly controversial thesis set forth by E.D. Hirsch in his Validity in Interpretation and from Beardsley's The Possibility of Criticism.
that a writer's professions do not always point in the right direction. Shaw, for example, called *The Doctor's Dilemma* a tragedy, "but it is hard to believe that he meant the description seriously. In manner and tone the play is a comedy."\(^4\) Again, Shaw declared that he intended his art not as an end but as a means to the betterment of human life. He called himself an "artist-philosopher" and ridiculed "pure artists." But if we examine *The Doctor's Dilemma* we find that whatever "ideas" are found in it are there for the comedy rather than that the comedy was written to serve the ideas. On this occasion at least, it is the "pure" artist who is speaking rather than the "artist-philosopher."\(^5\) Thus, even if the author's intention were precisely ascertainable, the meaning of a work cannot lie in the author's intention alone. It must also lie in its effect. Dr Ernest Jones had discovered that Shakespeare intended to ascribe an Oedipus motive to *Hamlet's* inaction. Trilling admits that there might well be an Oedipus situation in *Hamlet* but it is certainly not the meaning of the play. What is the meaning of *Hamlet*? If we say meaning is intention, then we ought to remember that "Shakespeare did not intend the Oedipus motive or


\(^5\) Ibid., pp. 41-42.
anything less than Hamlet”; if we say meaning is effect, then “it is Hamlet which affects us; not the Oedipus motive.” For, after all, Coriolanus also deals with the Oedipus motive, but the effect of the one drama is quite different from the effect of the other. 48

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"Criticism," Matthew Arnold said, is "a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world, and thus to establish a current of fresh and true ideas." 49 As England is not all the world, the English critic must dwell much on foreign thought. In fact Arnold regarded Europe as being, "for intellectual and spiritual purposes, one great confederation, bound to a joint action and working to a common result; and whose members have, for their proper outfit,

48 Trilling, "Freud and Literature," in LI, p. 63. Arnold by implication discusses some of these problems in his references to the fallacy of the personal estimate. Arnold is as much aware as the modern critics of the way biography might divert our attention away from the work of art. It may come in the way of a disinterested reading of the work. But Arnold certainly wouldn't carry the objection as far as the New Critics and ignore biography altogether. We have his essay on Shelley testifying against himself and betraying the fallacy of the personal estimate; on the other hand, the essay on Byron makes a just use of biography.

a knowledge of Greek, Roman and Eastern antiquity, and of one another." Arnold thus postulated a kind of United States of Europe from which higher standpoint he interpreted and evaluated British works of thought and imagination. Goethe's work had been nourished by a great critical effort "providing the true materials for it, and Byron's was not." No stronger proof is needed of the low ebb of the critical spirit in England than the fact that "while the critical hit in the religious literature of Germany is Dr Strauss's book, in that of France M. Renan's book, the book of Bishop Colenso is the critical hit in the religious literature of England." It is this European confederation that Lionel Trilling constantly keeps in view in all his critical thinking. Even as a writer he sought to relate himself


Ibid., p. 12.

Ibid., p. 28.

This is one of the many points in which T.S. Eliot, for all his anti-Arnoldian stance, clearly reveals the Arnoldian influence. "Both critics are advocates of cosmopolitanism, concerned with the European community, and fond of repeating Goethe's dictum that one cannot know one's own culture well without knowing another well." (John Henry Raleigh, "T.S. Eliot," in Matthew Arnold and American Culture (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press,
continually to the European consciousness. The Editors of Partisan Review asked Trilling in 1939, "Are you conscious, in your own writing, of the existence of a 'usable past'? Is this mostly American? What figures would you designate as elements in it?" Trilling replied:

Though I have great admiration and affection for the American classics and an increasing interest, I know that they have been far less important to me than the traditional body of European writers... I have a fortifying sense that there is, simply, a past of literature which makes a present all the more possible.54

The European consciousness enables Trilling to employ a scholarly method of comparative criticism by which he perceives connexions and interprets works and authors.55 For instance, he finds that Plato's Republic is pervasive throughout Forster's Howards End—Margaret's father, for instance, who was a soldier before he became a philosopher,


54 "The Situation in American Writing: Seven Questions (Part Two)," Partisan Review, 6 (Fall, 1939), 110.

55 "One of the most fundamental questions the critic can ask himself is: Beside what other works will this work be seen most clearly for what it is?" (David Daiches, "Lionel Trilling: E.M. Forster," Rev. of E.M. Forster, Accent, 4 (Autumn 1943), 61).
reminds us of Plato's watchdogs, "the military Guardians from whom the philosophical Guardians were chosen."^56 The type of solitary, savage heroes that Byron represented "has reference not to the personal will but the social will in its European corruption."^57 The imagination of Little Dorrit, marked not so much by powers of particularization as by powers of generalization, is akin to the imagination of The Divine Comedy.^58

But to trace connexions is not automatically to grant distinction. There is of course the element of individual talent which may be lacking in many cases. Sherwood Anderson, in his standing quarrel with respectable society and the rational intellect, belongs to a tradition in which the Essenes, the early Franciscans, the early Hasidim, and, in modern times, Blake, Whitman and D.H. Lawrence were his predecessors. "But Anderson lacked what his spiritual colleagues have always notably had . . . mind


^57 Trilling, "History of Heroism," The Nation, 10 July 1935, p. 53.

. . . energy and spiritedness, in their relation to mind." Trilling here uses the method of comparison—in time and space—to evaluate a writer's work. He refers the case of the American writer to the Amphictyonic Court of final appeal, the European tradition, and finds him wanting. There is also, in The Liberal Imagination, a critical observation on American prose literature of the 1940's in general. In contrast with modern European literature, which is an active literature, American prose literature is an "object" rather than a "subject." But the comparative method yields the richest fruits in Sincerity and Authenticity where Trilling uses the literatures of Europe as posts of observation to study the shifts in the moral life; the rise of the concept of sincerity and then its replacement by the idea of authenticity.


60 This is one instance to disprove W.J. Harvey's charge (in "Editorial Notes: Kulchar and Culture in America," Essays in Criticism, 10 (1960), 44-8) that Trilling's habit of elaborate culture-references is a "ploy," a "facade," that sometimes "conceals the evasion of judgment." There is, however, some justification for saying, as Harvey does, that sometimes the works Trilling discusses "crumble under the weight of significance imposed on them."

Trilling takes all three disciplines—history, biography and culture—and subsumes them under the Arnoldian dictum that literature is a criticism of life. Arnold had added, as if what he had said wasn't controversial enough, that it was a criticism mainly on the side of morality. Many modern critics have felt that Arnold here claims too much for literature; or he puts upon literature a weight which it cannot properly bear. If "criticism" seems too dull and censorious a word for what poetry does, the word "morality" further alienates most of twentieth-century readers. But Garrod points out that Arnold was only giving a "too-sharp expression" to something which had passed for a truism with poets and men of letters for five-and-twenty centuries. And, given Arnold's high demands upon poetry—"more and more mankind will turn to poetry to console us, to sustain us"—this statement of the concern of literature with morality should hardly surprise us. As Garrod says, even if poetry can do without morality, Arnold would have denied that morality can do without poetry. No, morality has "need of that quickening of vital forces which poetry gives." That is why


63 Ibid., p. 11. A conviction similar to Arnold's informs L.C. Knights's Public Voices (London: Chatto & Windus, 1971), where Professor Knights's main purpose is to suggest that the study and enjoyment of literature and the education in imagination that these can give are essential for the health of our political life, for political morality.
Arnold says, "currency and supremacy are insured to it, not indeed by the world's deliberate and conscious choice, but by something far deeper,—by the instinct of self-preservation in humanity."⁶⁴ How does poetry/literature help us to preserve ourselves? By bringing the faculty of imaginative reason to the study of the problems of human life; by reconciling rationalism and faith; by combining the "thought" and "ideas" that had come to govern the affairs of men after the French Revolution and the imaginative faculty with which poets had always seen life, the faculty that had restored John Stuart Mill to health and normality after he had suffered from an "emotional devitalization."⁶⁵

And yet "morality" jars on modern ears. We would all grant that literature should guide life; we are even prepared to admit that all literature is moral (without having a moral). But the insistence on morality, the insistence that literature should always teach, when carried too far, can be "obstructive of critical insight."⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Trilling, MA, p. 84.
Arnold himself carried it too far when he excluded Chaucer, Rabelais and Molière from his pantheon of great poets. "Morality" seemed here clearly to conflict with "life." The excessive moral commitment of another Arnoldian, F.R. Leavis, has resulted in the fault in his critical thought—Leavis "does not give anything like adequate recognition to those aspects of art which are gratuitous, which arise from high spirits and the impulse to play." Hence Leavis' lack of sympathy for Fielding and the greater part of Dickens' work. Unlike Leavis, Trilling can sympathize with the element of "sheer performance" in creation. He can enjoy the mind's delight in its own skill, "the powers of excess and fantasy." He can respond to the "irrelevant"

67 Trilling joins issue with Arnold for denying Chaucer the status of a classic. But we should remember that Arnold does not call Chaucer "immoral" nor trivial. He only found him wanting in SPoudaiotes—an Aristotelian concept for which "high seriousness" is an inadequate translation, for the Greek word means strictly an occupation with the highest concerns of life. What Arnold demands of poetry, therefore, is not just a "large, free, simple, clear, yet kindly view of human life,"--which Chaucer can give--but a vibration to a higher frequency. Dante is a classic because in him "divine justice is set over against human pathos, human dignity, human grandeur, human intellect, human justice." It is this ironic tension which informs the famous "touchstone," "In His Will is our peace" (See R.P. Warren, "Pure and Impure Poetry," Kenyon Review, 5 (Spring 1943), 228-54, reprinted in Perspectives in Poetry, ed. James L. Calderwood and Harold E. Toliver (New York: OUP, 1968), p. 89).

life" in Dickens' novels, to the minor civilized pleasures of reading Robert Graves or the workmanship of C.P. Snow.

He can receive entertainment from the mere "storying" that certain kinds of fiction, as for example some of Somerset Maugham's stories, represent.

T.S. Eliot objected to the statement that poetry is a criticism of life on the ground that "no phrase can sound more frigid to anyone who has felt the full surprise and elevation of a new experience of poetry." But the point, Trilling tells us, is that "surprise and elevation" are the very qualities which our life in culture lacked, according to Arnold, and which he wanted poetry to bring to life. Arnold meant, then, that poetry is a criticism of life in the sense that poetry displays the energy and delight that life ought to have but doesn't have. Poetry is a criticism of life in the sense that a good man is a criticism of a bad one. Poetry is a criticism of life in the sense that the Scholar Gipsy was a criticism of the life of an inspector of elementary schools. But, says

69 Rev. of A Gathering of Fugitives, Listener, 7 Nov. 1957, p. 751.


72 Trilling, "Preface," to OS, p. xiii.
Trilling, Arnold meant something more literal than this. Arnold meant that poetry put its finger on aspects of life and, sometimes by accident and implication but sometimes by intent, judged "Good" or "Bad."  

There seems to be an interesting development in the way Trilling interprets Arnold's statement or rather uses it in his own criticism. In an early article (1938), Trilling said that what Arnold had meant by "adequate" literature was "that which gave the writer an emotional adjustment with which he might effectively meet the world"; it is that literature which so synthesizes modern life, or enough of it, as to give us "emotional clarity." This reminds us of I.A. Richards' therapeutic requirement of poetry—that it satisfy the maximum number of impulses. Then there is the "Opposing Self" stage in which the artist is said to criticize life by his adverse imagination of the culture in which he has his existence. But even in The Opposing Self the heroes are William Dean Howells, "a man of moderate sentiments," a Henry James who

73Trilling, MA, p. 195.


had a sense of familial sacredness and a Keats who felt a keen pleasure in food and company. But by the 1960's, the autonomous self and the theory of alienation had run their course and done enough damage. Thus in "Why We Read Jane Austen," the lecture he was composing when he died, he returned to the simple view that literature still exists to redeem us from "moral torpor."^ David Kubal explains this stance:

If it [literature] does not, as had been so lately asserted, give us power over life or grant us a special spiritual prestige, it can make it possible, by putting us in contact with the past, to think of ourselves as other than we are, even to permit us to imagine ourselves becoming other than we are. Defined by culture as we conceive ourselves to be, we can yet derive a moral pleasure, an ease from the discontents of our minds, by perceiving those options, knowing that at another time at least, a novelist, like Jane Austen, could dramatize what we are not, even perhaps what we can never be.^77

If literature then is a criticism of life, what is the function of literary criticism? It is to see whether the criticism that literature offers is "adequate," to

^76 This lecture has been included in Lionel Trilling, The Last Decade: Essays and Reviews, 1965-1975, ed. Diana Trilling (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), pp. 204-25. The quotation here is from p. 212. The Last Decade is hereafter cited as LD.

examine whether the criticism is critical enough, whether the literature in question deals with ideas or simply in attitudes. The gravamen of Trilling's strictures on the liberal fiction of Anderson, Dreiser or even Steinbeck is that it presented attitudes rather than ideas. Again, modern literature, especially fiction, had tended to become uncritical in its acceptance of the doctrine of alienation. It is the duty of criticism, in such circumstances, to point out the inadequacy of the ideas on which the literature continued to base itself, to make available to literature fresher, more adequate ideas.

* * *

The influence of Freud on Trilling the intellectual and the critic is outside the scope of this thesis which is concerned mainly with the Arnoldian aspects of Trilling's criticism. But while we discuss Trilling's conception of the relationship between life and literature we must at least mention the considerable part that Freud's thought played in that conception. It would of course


79Freudian thought in fact exercises a profound influence on Trilling as it constitutes the "current of ideas" that Arnold expected the writer and the critic to live in. In fact, as W.H. Auden puts it in his poem "In Memory of Sigmund Freud," to us as to Trilling, Freud is "no more a person/Now but a whole climate of opinion."
be wrong to hold Trilling wholly indebted to Freud for his formulation of the relationship between the self and the general culture. But we may certainly say that Trilling's view of the necessarily adversary relationship between the self (especially the poet's self) and the culture received no small confirmation and reinforcement from Freud's own thinking. This in fact is the chief reason for the interest that Trilling took as a literary intellectual in Freud the philosopher and scientist. For both Freud and literature regard the individual self as the prime object of attention. Both are dedicated to the conception of the self in relation to culture. It is to Trilling's point that Freud recognizes that literature conceives of the self and the selfhood of others far more intensely than the general culture ever can. That is what makes literature moral—from this position of awareness of his own self and of the selfhood of others, the poet is able to offer his criticism of this life and of the culture around him. Freud is therefore right to warn against making the self too independent upon culture, because we would then be cutting off "the possibility of the triumphs of the mind that are won in the face of culture."\(^80\)

\(^80\) Trilling, "Freud: Within and Beyond Culture," in BG, p. 117.
There is another reason why Trilling regards psychoanalysis as highly relevant to literature and the study of literature. Freud views poetry-making not as an eccentric activity but as indigenous to the mind, for the regular processes of mental functioning are poetic in nature. For example, one striking aspect of the mental life is the habit of comparing, creating metaphor, setting up fields of association. 81

Psychoanalysis with its theory of subconscious motives, has also reinforced, in fact has given the first impetus to, "the whole notion of rich ambiguity in literature, of the interplay between the apparent meaning and the latent ... meaning." 82 For example, it is almost impossible, says Trilling, "not to find throughout 'Sohrab and Rustum' at least a shadowy personal significance." The strong son is slain by the mightier father; Sohrab's drawing out his father's spear from his own side to let out his life and end the anguish is symbolic of Matthew Arnold in his later life giving up his "poetic talent, formed in the solitude of the self," for the sake of maturity and character "formed in the crowding objectivity of the world." 83

81 Trilling, "Freud and Literature," in LI, p. 64.
82 Ibid., p. 62.
83 Trilling, MA, pp. 134-35.