CHAPTER TWO

A CRITIQUE OF LIBERALISM

Duke: . . . How dost thou, my good fellow?

Clown: Truly, sir, the better for my foes and the worse for my friends.

Duke: Just the contrary: the better for thy friends.

Clown: No, sir, the worse.

Duke: How can that be?

Clown: Marry, sir, they praise me and make an ass of me. Now my foes tell me plainly I am an ass; so that by my foes, sir, I profit in the knowledge of myself, and by my friends I am abused; so that, conclusions to be as kisses, if your four negatives make your two affirmatives, why then, the worse for my friends and the better for my foes.

- Twelfth Night, V.1.8-20

The major misfortune of twentieth-century American liberalism, Lionel Trilling complains, is that its friends only coxced it up in its complacency and self-righteousness while its enemies, failing to exercise any intellectual pressure, only confirmed liberalism in its inadequacies. If liberalism was ill-served by its champions like Steinbeck, it was even more unfortunate in its detractors like Rudyard Kipling, whom Trilling paradoxically calls "one of liberalism's"—not conservatism's—"major
intellectual misfortunes."¹ Every liberal should, therefore, echo John Stuart Mill's prayer, "'Lord, enlighten thou our enemies . . .' ; sharpen their wits, give acuteness to their perceptions." But in the absence of any such intelligent intellectual opposition—Trilling bemoans the fact that liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition in the America of the thirties and forties—the true liberal himself has to play the part of the critic of liberalism, has to, that is, put "under some degree of pressure the liberal ideas and assumptions of the present time."² We find Trilling not only following Matthew Arnold in his general loyalty to the liberalist view of life and politics, but also performing the typically Arnoldian function of disinterestedness with regard to the liberalism of his day.

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But before we proceed with the discussion of Trilling's critique of liberalism, we would do well to state, in brief, the points of agreement and difference between the liberalism Trilling evaluates and the liberalism that Arnold criticized. There are, at any rate, differences in emphasis. Trilling would recognize, as would Arnold,

¹Trilling, "Kipling," in LI, p. 133.

²Trilling, "Preface" to LI, pp. 9-10.
that historically liberalism is essentially an effort to reconcile the idealistic values of the Enlightenment with the realistic values of Romanticism. Trilling calls the two "opposing and complementary elements of a dialectical situation."^3 If the Enlightenment brought in a "questioning of traditional doctrines, and values, a tendency toward individualism and an emphasis on the idea of universal human progress . . . and the free use of reason"^4 as well as a confidence in man's power to shape his fate, Romanticism, cherishing as it did the sacredness of the life of instinct and emotions, checked the tendency of liberalism to "envisage the world in . . . a 'prosaic' way,"^5 and to, in fact, deny the emotions and the imagination. Romanticism and the Enlightenment are thus properly a part of the heritage of all liberalism—Mill's, Arnold's, and Trilling's.

From all the ideas of these two movements, Englishmen of the nineteenth century seized on, with great fervour, one, the doctrine of individualism, and erected


^5Trilling, "Preface" to LI, p. 12.
It was this excessive importance attached to individual liberty, this "my-house-is-my-castle" nonsense, this Dissidence of Dissent and the Protestantism of the Protestants, that Arnold continually attacked. The *laissez-faire* attitude of the English had not only perpetrated the worst economic and social injustices; it had also resulted in intellectual and spiritual anarchy. To the British middle class liberalism meant "one thing primarily: a State that could not control him except when he indulged in common law crime, an activity which did not attract him." worse still was the vulgar provincialism which produced and nurtured men like Sir Charles Adderley and Mr. Roebuck who proclaimed from the rooftops that "the race we ourselves represent . . . the old Anglo-Saxon race, are the best breed in the whole world," and asked, "whether, the world over or in past history, there is anything like it?" Arnold's solution, if we put it somewhat summarily for the sake of brevity, was the rejection of *laissez-faire* in economics and the search for centrality and order in matters of intellect and thought without sacrificing individual freedom and initiative. All this was to be achieved by the

6 Trilling, *MA*, p. 179.

constitution of the State which itself was to be based on
the "best self" of each class.8

There were other grounds on which Arnold pilloried
contemporary liberals: their lack of intelligence (espe­
cially the "Ungeist" of the manufacturing middle class as
Arminius in Friendship's Garland terms it), their bustle,
their obnoxious work ethic which barred all those matters
of the spirit which would bring "sweetness and light,"
their distrust of ideas and above all their cocksure adhe­
rence to blind custom and prejudice which prevented the
entry of reason and intelligence in their lives.

So much for the historical context and the substance
of Arnold's criticism of liberalism. By the time Trilling
started his career as a writer and critic, Marxism had
become an element in the mental make-up of the liberals

Trilling points out that Arnold here faced a dilemma.
"'How may we constitute the State?' 'Be ye perfect. Love
one another.' 'How shall we be perfect and love one
another?' 'Constitute your State.' Here is confusion in
a circle." The confusion however lay in the very nature
of the problem. The cultural and moral life of individuals
depends on the State but the constitution of the State
itself depends on the perfection of individuals. "The way
in which society is ordered determines the moral life of
individuals and classes, but the moral life of individuals
and classes determines the way in which society is ordered." Arnold tries to solve the problem by "admitting some process
of history in which morality is a goal of the long range but
not a means, in which the evil of the moment may work the
good of the developmental process, and in which power is
its own temporary justification" (Trilling, MA, p. 254).
(at any rate of American liberals) though it did not always express itself openly. Collectivism had now come to be taken for granted in the economic sphere. What was more important, in the wake of notions of the "commitment" that every citizen, including especially the writer, should have, collectivism had come to make inroads into the country of the mind and spirit also, destroying individual will. And in the process of the desired organization of society that liberalism had always envisaged, liberals had now become lost in abstractions, had lost sight of the primal impulse of the liberal faith, its origin and foundation in the imagination and the emotions, had in fact made the living and dynamic liberal principle into a rigid and mechanical system. In such a situation, the task of the critic of liberalism, as Trilling saw it, was to renovate the will and to recall liberalism to its primal impulse of imagination, to recall it to its sense of "variousness and possibility, which implies the awareness of complexity and difficulty." Literature, especially the novel, has a unique relevance to this job of criticizing the liberal imagination because it is literature, of all human activities, that shows "a lively sense of contingency and possibility," that takes the fullest account of "variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty."  

With these caveats added, we may now proceed to a detailed account and examination of Trilling's views on American liberalism.

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We may start with a consideration of two questions which Trilling poses and answers, for we may say that the questions and the answers together form the basis of Trilling's critique of liberalism. Liberal ideas—such as a "suspiciousness of the profit motive, a belief in progress, science, social legislation, planning, and international cooperation, perhaps especially where Russia is in question"—"do great credit to those who hold them." But how does it happen that "not a single first-rate writer has emerged to deal with these ideas, and the emotions that are consonant with them, in a great literary way"? The liberal ideology has indeed produced a large literature of social and political protest, a "literature of piety," but the literature has "neither imagination nor mind."10 It has no lasting interest. We may very likely "learn from it as citizens; and as citizen-scholars and citizen-critics we understand and explain it. But we do not live in an active and reciprocal relation with it."11 We never


get from it "the sense of largeness, of cogency," the sense of "transcendence" that great literature can give. And then there is also the puzzling fact that the great writers of the modern age—Eliot, Proust, Lawrence, Gide—have been indifferent or even hostile to the tradition of democratic liberalism.

The second question: How do we explain the fact that American liberal readers have not responded adequately or enthusiastically to, have not found literary merit in, writers who have exemplified the liberal imagination at its best and who ought therefore to have been held dear by liberals in America too? Henry James, for example. E.M. Forster, for example.

If, then, liberalism has produced neither great writers nor good readers, the explanation must be found in the liberal ideas themselves or at least in the way they are held by American liberals. We may say that the answers to these two questions, or the explanations to these two facts,


13 In Beyond Culture, Trilling offers an explanation to this fact: "it is not the [liberal] idea in its ideal form that is being despised but rather the idea as it passes current in specious form" ("The Leavis-Snow Controversy," in BC, p. 168).
constitute Trilling's criticism of liberalism.14

One explanation is that the American liberals had misconceived the very nature of the relationship between society and the artist. Thomas Wolfe—one of those writers overvalued by the reading public—made the "simple affirmation that literature must become the agent of the immediate solution of all social problems and undertake the prompt eradication of human pain."15 Poets, Shelley said, are the unacknowledged legislators of the world. The truth of the statement depends chiefly on that word "unacknowledged." But unfortunately many liberal critics and writers had declared "that poets are the fully acknowledged legislators of the world or at least ought to be judged as if they were."16 From such a position, it is but the next step to talk of the "societal" function of the artist and of the "spiritual positives" he must provide. With such

14 All the essays (except perhaps the one on "The Immortality Ode") collected under the title The Liberal Imagination show a remarkable unity, bearing as they do in some way or the other on the limitations of contemporary American liberalism.

15 Trilling, "The Meaning of a Literary Idea," in LI, p. 297. Trilling adds: "and because his closest friend did not agree that this was a possible thing for literature to do, Wolfe terminated the friendship"! (Ibid.)

wrong-headed views of "commitment," the critic can find merit only in work like that of Steinbeck. But Steinbeck's "spiritual positives" are all "fabricated," not because he lacks talent but because "he misconceives his role; he thinks like a societal function, not like a novelist." It is of course conceivable that books like *The Grapes of Wrath* have an immediate useful effect by rallying people to the right side. "But ultimately they leave hollowness and confusion." 17

With such mistaken notions of the "duty of the artist to the society," "populist critics" charge it against the great writers that they do not write for "the many." Trilling's answer states the right relationship of the writer with his audience and the right kind of commitment so lucidly and so forcefully that it must be quoted in its entirety:

> From the democratic point of view, we must say that in a true democracy nothing should be done for the people. The writer who defines his audience by its limitations is indulging in the unforgivable arrogance. The writer must define his audience by its abilities, by its perfections, so far as he is gifted to conceive them. He does well, if he cannot see his right audience within immediate reach of his voice, to direct his words to his spiritual ancestors, or to posterity, or even, if need be, to a coterie. The writer serves his daemon and his subject. And

the democracy that does not know that the daemon and the subject must be served is not, in any ideal sense of the word, a democracy at all.\textsuperscript{18}

While wrong views of "commitment" resulted in the neglect of the literary merits of great writers, they also led to the exaltation of writers who, though lacking in intelligence, may be on the "right side" in the "social question." Such partisan judgments Trilling attributes to what he calls the "Angelic Fallacy" which consists in the fond belief that "when a writer is, generally speaking, on the side of the angels," when for example he is a hater of chaos and injustice, "he must for some reason be admirable and the expressed ground for his partisanship sound."\textsuperscript{19}

Another explanation why liberal ideas have not inspired a great body of literature in America lay in a "cultural fact," "our habit of conceiving the nature of ideas in general."\textsuperscript{20} Too often writers conceive ideas to be "pellets of intellection or crystallizations of thought, precise and completed," not as living things "susceptible of growth and


development by their very nature."\textsuperscript{21} (Trilling here reveals an important aspect of his own intellectual life, that dislike of the unmodulated idea which springs from the Arnol- dian love of disinterestedness.) Such an inadequate conception of ideas in general results quite often in the kind of "awkwardness in the handling of ideas" that Trilling finds in \textit{The Kinsey Report}. The \textit{Report} is "ill at ease with any idea that is in the least complex and it often tries to get rid of such an idea in favour of another that has the appearance of not going beyond the statement of physical fact."\textsuperscript{22} The liberal quite often shows a fear of ideas; he seems to be afraid that ideas might diminish reality.

That takes us to another basic weakness in liberal thinking on art. According to the "metaphysics" behind liberal criticism, formulated by Vernon Farrington in his \textit{Main Currents in American Thought} and followed ardently by his "co-adjutors and disciples, who make up . . . the literary academicism of liberalism,"\textsuperscript{23} there exists an opposition between reality and mind or ideas; and reality is "always material reality, hard, resistant, unformed,


impenetrable, and unpleasant.24 In the opposition between reality and mind one must of course enlist oneself on the side of reality. Thus Dreiser is praised because he was a "peasant" and had "the slow stubbornness of a peasant";25 and Henry James is ignored because he was devoted to "the idea of intellectual honour" and displayed "electrical qualities of mind."26 Hawthorne's greatness is suspect in the eyes of Parrington because "he turned away"27 from reality. The fact, however, is that Hawthorne, the man who could raise "those brilliant and serious doubts about the nature and possibility of moral perfection" was dealing beautifully with realities, with substantial things.28 Parrington's view delimits the "real" by excluding from it all that may tend to complexity, the mental, the moral, the ambiguous. The Kinsey Report which purports to study "Sexual Behavior in the Human Male," means by "behaviour" only "behaviouristic behaviour, only that behaviour which is physical."29 The Report ignores, for example, the fact that sexual behaviour is involved with the whole of the

25Ibid., p. 25. 26Ibid., p. 27.
27Ibid., p. 22. 28Ibid.
individual's character and it fails to grant the existence of sexuality as a social fact.

Closely related to the liberals' simplistic and inadequate conception of reality in general is a particular kind of attitude to the social reality which too shut them off from a proper appreciation of a great many works of literature, especially novels. Here it would be pertinent to record Trilling's own view of what the novel should do, what, in fact, the great novels of the past have done. The novel deals primarily with the problem of appearance and reality, the problem of deception and self-deception, as these are seen in social relationships. R.W.B. Lewis explains Trilling's view thus:

Reality, whatever its character, has to do with society; it is to be looked for amidst the actions and interactions of men, and there only; ... The social, properly understood, is the real; and to the real, consequently, the ambiguous and the conceptual must be admitted, for they are undeniable factors in the motivations of men.30

The chief concern of the novel is thus with class distinctions, and the snobbery they generate and the manners they express themselves in. "Manners" are thus devices by which the novelist penetrates to the morals and so to reality. The novel achieves its moral perceptions in the context

of the variegated social reality with all that it implies of complexity and ambiguity.31

Now there was a factor in the very historical origin and development of the United States of America which seemed to prevent the growth of the novel form in the right direction: it is the absence of those things which have given the English novel its thick social texture. Henry James, who felt compelled to move to England to achieve a proper insight into the complex motivations behind the actions of individuals and societies, enumerated these things in his life of Hawthorne. Trilling quotes this passage in his essay, "Manners, Morals, and the Novel." There is, in America,

no state; barely a specific national name; no sovereign; no court; no aristocracy; no church; no clergy; no army; no diplomatic service; no country gentlemen; no palaces; no castles; no manors; no old country houses; no parsonages; no thatched cottages; no ivied ruins; no cathedrals; no great universities; no public schools; no political society; no sporting class—no Epsom, no Ascot! That is, no sufficiency of means for the display of a variety of manners, no opportunity for the novelist to do his job of searching out reality, not enough complication of appearances to make the job interesting (emphasis added).32


32Ibid., p. 215. To the absence of religious establishments in America, Matthew Arnold attributed America's
Thus the American society, by its very nature, lacked that "substantiality," that "density" which is the real basis of the novel. Added to this deficiency there was the democratic ideal which had in the twentieth century developed into radical liberal notions of equality. On account of all this, the American mind is deeply distrustful of class divisions even as a means of probing reality. In fact, most Americans fought shy even of mentioning class in any social discussion, just as Victorian upper middle class Englishmen and Englishwomen fought shy of mentioning money. ("Dear, don't talk about money, it's so ugly," E.M. Forster was told by his rich aunts.) Trilling

33Trilling admits elsewhere in The Liberal Imagination ("Art and Fortune," p. 274) that there is a fertile field for the novelist in the groupings--based on ideology--which America seems to have developed since James's day. But unfortunately, as Norman Podhoretz points out, Trilling does not develop this idea ("The Arnoldian Function in American Criticism," Scrutiny, 18 (June 1951), 64). It is also curious that Trilling does not see any potential for the novel in the ethnic variety of America. However, David Daiches tells us that Trilling's major thesis has been widely accepted, and indeed lies behind, for example, Richard Chase's book, The American Novel and Its Tradition (1957)(David Daiches, English Literature (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964), pp. 126-27).

refers to the famous exchange between Scott Fitzgerald and Hemingway—when Fitzgerald said, "The very rich are different from us," Hemingway replied, "Yes, they have more money"—and says:

> It is usually supposed that Hemingway had the better of the encounter and quite settled the matter. But we ought not to be too sure. The novelist of a certain kind, if he is to write about social life, may not brush away the reality of the differences of class, even though to do so may have the momentary appearance of a virtuous social avowal. . . . The novelist must still live by his sense of class differences, and must be absorbed by them, as Fitzgerald was, even though he despise them, as Fitzgerald did.\(^{35}\)

The reticence about class distinctions was perhaps the result of the egalitarian notion that the soul is too grand to be spoken of in social terms and that manners are trivial. To accept class distinctions, the liberal writers and critics thought, was to accept the "conditioned" nature of human beings and that would certainly detract from the success of the programme of social reformation and propaganda that literature, especially the novel, was required

\(^{35}\) Trilling, "F. Scott Fitzgerald," in \textit{LR}, pp. 247-48. "American literature, in comparison with the British, is defined by its tendency to transcend or circumvent the social fact and to concentrate upon the individual in relation to himself, to God, or to the cosmos, and, even when the individual stands in relation to the social fact, to represent society and the ordinary life of daily routine not as things assumed and taken for granted, but as problems posed, as alien and hostile to the spiritual life" (Trilling, "An American View of English Literature," \textit{Reporter}, 13 Nov. 1951).
Such views naturally alienated the American reading public from authors like E.M. Forster and Henry James who, perhaps because they had nothing of the taste for the "unconditioned," were able to deal so well with the idea of class and the social reality. The Princess Casamassima is thus "a brilliantly precise representation of social actuality." Trilling, EMF, p. 102. James knows that "a true knowledge of society comprehends the reality of the social forces it presumes to study and is aware of contradictions and consequences."37 Howards End is "a story of the class war." At one end of the middle class scale is the clerk, Leonard Bast. At the other end is Mr Wilcox, the rich businessman. Between are the Schlegel sisters, Margaret and Helen, intellectuals living comfortably on solid incomes. 38 Even The Longest Journey, which begins with a metaphysical discussion of reality--"Is the cow there?"--soon settles down to the problem of social reality. Stewart Ansell, who insists that the cow is really there, refuses to greet Agnes Pembroke when she is introduced to him, refuses to acknowledge

36 Trilling, "The Princess Casamassima," in LI, p. 84.

37 Ibid., p. 90.

38 Trilling, EMF, p. 102.
even her existence. She is simply not there, he says. This sounds quite comical. But we discover its essential truthfulness when we see, in the course of the novel, that Rickie's tragedy is mainly due to the mistake he makes about the reality of Agnes.39

And Forster presents his complex social reality, as does James, without any sentimentality. Hyacinth Robinson, the hero of The Princess Casamassima, may be a snob but if he is a snob, he is "of the company of Rabelais, Shakespeare, Scott, Dickens, Balzac, and Lawrence, men who saw the lordliness and establishment of the aristocrat and the gentleman as the proper condition for the spirit of man." Hyacinth's snobbery is "no other than that of John Stuart Mill when he discovered that a grand and spacious room could have so enlarging an effect upon his mind."40 Forster does not, as James Agee does, create characters who are repositories of all virtue.41 Stephen Wonham in The Longest Journey is a gentleman born but he outrages the feelings of certain intelligent, liberal, democratic

39Trilling, EMF, pp. 67-69.


41Trilling, "Greatness with One Fault in It," Kenyon Review, 4 (Winter 1942), 102. Trilling, however, was to reverse his opinion of Agee's work. See Chapter Nine below.
people in the novel and many readers in America by his rude treatment of a friend, a shepherd, when the latter fails to pay back a loan. The point is that Stephen Wonham thinks of the shepherd not as an object of research, not as one of the poor but rather as a reciprocating subject in a relationship of affection, as a friend, and therefore liable to anger and required to pay his debts. But this view, Trilling complains, is held by American liberals to be deficient in intelligence, liberalism, and democracy. As a matter of fact, Forster has here accorded equal dignity to both the characters. But "we who are liberal and progressive know that the poor are our equals in every sense except that of being equal to us."

The major deficiency of liberal literature is its lack of what Trilling calls "moral realism." As Norman Podhoretz perceptively notes, Trilling pits this "moral realism" (which he discovers in, among other great novelists, Hawthorne, Henry James, Forster and Scott Fitzgerald) against the Farrington sense of realism. Moral

\[^{42}\text{Trilling, "Manners, Morals, and the Novel," in }\text{LI, p. 220.}\]

\[^{43}\text{Trilling, "The Princess Casamassima," in }\text{LI, p. 97.}\]

\[^{44}\text{Norman Podhoretz, "The Arnoldian Function in American Criticism," }\text{Scrutiny, 18 (June 1951), 64.}\]
realism consists in the awareness not "of morality itself but of the contradictions, paradoxes and dangers of living the moral life." There is as it were a morality of morality. Thus the American liberal acquiescing in the rigours of "the Russian experiment" is a source of great irony; he has exhausted "the scrupulosity which made him deprecate all power" and become "extravagantly tolerant of what he had once denounced." Trilling finds merit in Tess Slesinger's The Unpossessed because it was an effort of moral realism, because it saw that the life of radicalism is not exempt from moral dangers. It "brought word of danger in the very place where salvation was believed to be certain." Starting with a disillusionment with the old values, Tess Slesinger gradually moved to an awareness that in the new values themselves there is "an absoluteness or abstractness which has the effect of denying some free instinctual impulse that life must have." Like so many

45 Trilling, EMF, p. 12.


47 Trilling, "A Novel of the Thirties," in LD, p. 16. The essay was originally entitled "Young in the Thirties" and published as Afterword to the republication of The Unpossessed by Tess Slesinger, Avon, 1966).

48 Ibid., p. 20.
reformers, she too started with the conviction that there is no "work so great/As that which cleans man's dirty slate,"—the words are from Yeats's "The Man and the Echo"—but, "in one especially vivacious and articulate moment she took notice of the scribble she had not expected to see on the slate—the one made by the spiritual intellect itself."^49

Moral realism is the product of the free play of the moral imagination. The moral imagination stands against the assumption of liberal culture "that the life of man can be nicely settled by a correct social organization, or, short of that, by the election of high moral attitudes."^51 It is this moral imagination which helps Henry James to show how in Paul Muniment, driven as he is by revolutionary fervour, "a genuine idealism coexists with a secret desire for personal power."^52 E.M. Forster is aware, as American


^50 Trilling refuses to substitute his term "moral imagination" by "psychological insight." For "in literature as well as in life the psychological is subsumed in the moral and to try to make the smaller concept do the work of the larger is to mask actuality" (Trilling, "A Rejoinder to Mr Barrett," Partisan Review, 16 (June 1949), 657).

^51 Ibid.

liberals were not, that there can be a pettiness about altruism. Caroline Abbott of *Where Angels Fear to Tread* tells Philip Herriton that she hates Sawston for its "idleness, stupidity, respectability, and petty unselfishness." "Petty selfishness," Philip corrects her. "Petty unselfishness," she insists and immediately becomes the heroine of the novel," Trilling observes with marvellous critical insight. The Herritons make Lilia the object first of their pity, then of their organization and finally of their coercion. To see and present such dangers of the moral life, to see evil co-existing with good, to see evil masking under virtue, is the gift of the moral imagination of Forster "who can say of one of his characters that he was 'cursed with the Primal Curse, which is not the knowledge of good and evil, but the knowledge of good-and-evil.'" 

One reason why Forster did not find favour with the American liberal public is that his moral realism is in striking contrast with their naive humanitarian optimism.

53Trilling, EMT, p. 59.

54Ibid., p. 13. Forster says this of Rickie Elliot, the hero of *The Longest Journey*.

55In Trilling's own novel *The Middle of the Journey*, the Grooms represent the liberals in their refusal to attribute any wickedness to Duck Caldwell.
American liberal culture can in fact be said to be "man's effort to be good by fiat. Our popular art... is devoted to fostering the sense of freedom from guilt. PM will sell you daily innocence for a nickel." Most of the liberal writers show "a smug refusal to face the personal application of the Biblical truth that 'the heart is desperately wicked, yea, who can know it'" Henry James, on the contrary, has what he himself called the imagination of disaster, and sees life as ferocious and sinister.

Another manifestation of the liberals' simple optimism is the refusal to accept or even to talk about death or suffering. This is perhaps the reason, Trilling observes, for the denial or attenuation of most of Freud's concepts—like the death instinct, the repetition compulsion.

56 Trilling, "A Derivative Devil," Kenyon Review, 7 (Summer 1945), 501.


59 Here again, the Crooms in The Middle of the Journey illustrate the liberal weakness. They assiduously avoid any mention of Laskell's illness or of Susan Caldwell's death. In striking contrast to the liberal shrinking from the idea of death is the heroic courage and fortitude with which Keats accepted death (Trilling, "The Poet as Hero: Keats in His Letters," in OS, p. 48).
etc. Liberals found Freud "cogent but too stringent and too dark." On the contrary Trilling finds Freud liberating in the "quality of grim poetry" of his ideas and his "ultimate tragic courage in acquiescence to fate." Freud, and Forster and James and Hawthorne, make us liberals in a new sense: "liberals who recognize the inevitability of human suffering and do not think it an aberration that could be abolished by social change."

As strong as the tendency of the liberals to ignore the reality of the present was their inclination to disregard the reality of the past, or in other words, the value of tradition. This accounts for the popularity of Theodore Dreiser who thought that "tradition is a fraud," and for the unpopularity of Forster who maintained a direct and conscious connexion with tradition. Forster loves Greece in its mythical and naturalistic aspects. He traces his humanism to Montaigne and Erasmus.


64 Trilling, EMF, p. 19.
Trilling praises Scott Fitzgerald because, though a "natural," Fitzgerald did not share the contemporary American belief that relationship and comparison with tradition would endanger his natural gifts. Even the voice of Fitzgerald's prose has "a largeness, even a stateliness, which derives from Fitzgerald's connection with tradition." 65

But in the America of the forties, the opinion still prevailed that "a conscious relation with the past can only debilitate a novelist's powers." 66 Deep down in the American liberal there is not only this antipathy to the past, there is in fact, Trilling tells us in "The Sense of the Past," the secret wish that man's life in history shall come to an end:

History, as we now understand it, envisions its own extinction—that is really what we nowadays mean by "progress"—[We should remember that "progress" was one of the watchwords of liberalism]—and with all

65 Trilling, "F. Scott Fitzgerald," in II, p. 253. An interesting example of the American indifference to the value of tradition is the fact that, in striking contrast to the situation in England, there have been very few American families that have established an intellectual line. In fact the British phenomenon—of the leading members of the intellectual professions being related to each other by ties of blood and marriage—seems to the liberal mind comic and entirely astonishing (Trilling, "The Great-Aunt of Mr Forster," in A Gathering of Fugitives (London: Secker & Warburg, 1957), p. 10. See in this connexion also Frederick Crews, E.M. Forster: The Perils of Humanism (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1962), p. 7). A Gathering of Fugitives is hereafter cited as AGF.

66 Trilling, EMT, p. 19.
the passion of a desire kept secret even from ourselves, we yearn to elect a way of life which shall be satisfactory once and for all, time without end, and we do not want to be reminded by the past of the considerable possibility that our present is but perpetuating mistakes and failures and instituting new troubles.  

And yet, Trilling objects, "when we come to think about it, the chances are all in favour of our having to go on making our choices and so of making our mistakes."  

That brings us to the basic ground of Trilling's quarrel with American liberalism. A considerable number of liberals were committed to Marxism or rather to "the degraded version of Marxism known as Stalinism." Even as the Stalinist intellectuals saw in the present a haven from the errors of the past, they saw in the revolutionary will—which means really the will of "an imposed monolithic government"—"the promise of rest from the particular acts of will which are needed to meet the many, often clashing requirements of democratic society." That is, even as they hoped that man's life in history shall come to an end, they seemed to wish that man's life in politics, that  


68 Ibid. Matthew Arnold, on the other hand, showed an acceptance of human history which prevented him from "the Protestant and Liberal readiness to stamp much or all of what had gone before as error, pure and simple" (Trilling, MA, p. 333).
men's lives in their individual wills, should come to an end. For they fervently believed that "the Soviet Union had resolved all social and political contradictions and was well on the way toward realizing the highest possibilities of human life." What was worse, they deliberately ignored the facts, when the facts were brought to their attention, say, by George Orwell or by Arthur Koestler or by Whittaker Chambers, that would shake their certitude. The revolution was "the final, all-embracing act of will which would forever end the exertions of our individual wills." As there was no revolution in America, the animus of these Stalinist intellectuals against the individual will expressed itself in "moral and cultural attitudes which devalued all the gratuitous manifestations of feeling, of thought, and of art, of all such energies of the human spirit as are marked by spontaneity, complexity, and variety."69

The task then was the reconstitution and renovation

69 Trilling, "Art, Will, and Necessity," in LD, pp. 140-41. This essay, a rewritten version of a lecture first delivered in 1973, is in part a reply to Robert Scholes, "The Illiberal Imagination," New Literary History, 4, No. 3 (Spring 1973), 528. Professor Scholes had referred to Trilling's conviction that the primary task of the novelist should be the renovation of the will and had said that Trilling's view had become obsolete and that there had recently been a welcome shift, among novels and novelists, to structuralism (which Scholes defined as a way of looking for reality not in individual persons or things but in the relationships among them).
of the will. An extreme solution to this problem would be that found by the Stalinist-turned-theists, by Whittaker Chambers or Trilling's representation of him, the Gifford Maxim of *The Middle of the Journey*. The solution for these people consisted in the utter identification with the Divine Will (not the revolutionary will of society), the owning of absolute personal, individual responsibility to God for one's actions and thoughts, which means also the refusal to invoke the chimera of social and cultural causation. It would be a kind of apocalyptic renovation of the Will.70

But Trilling (at least in *The Liberal Imagination* stage of his life) has no use for this kind of renovation. For this apocalyptic vision of renovation,

one must be either a particular kind of moral genius with an attachment to life that goes beyond attachment to any particular form of life—D.H. Lawrence was such a genius—or a person deficient in attachment to life in any of its forms. Most of us are neither one nor the other, and our notions of renovation and reconstitution are social and pragmatic and in the literal sense of the word conservative (emphasis added).71

"To the restoration and reconstitution of the will


thus understood the novelistic intelligence is most apt." How does the novel achieve this? Once again Trilling enlists the support of one of his favourites, Henry James. James had noted in his Preface to The American how men of great imagination have always maintained an equal commerce with both "reality" and "romance." "Reality" here is not the Parrington kind of reality, but "the things we cannot possibly not know." "Romance" (again not in Parrington's sense, we may add), means "the things that can reach us only through the beautiful circuit of thought and desire"; it stands for "the world of unfolding possibility, for that which, when brought to actuality, is powerfully operative." It is the great virtue of the novel that it maintains this equilibrium between reality and romance. For, on the one hand, the novel shows the lively sense of the variety and complexity of reality. On the other, the novel, of all forms of human activity, shows the greatest awareness of the will in its "beautiful circuit of thought and desire." It is in the novel that the will, while continuing to display its strength and activity, "learns to refuse to exercise itself upon the unworthy objects with which the social world tempts it, and either conceives its own right objects or becomes content with its own sense of its potential force." 72

Before we conclude by noticing the implications and limitations of this view of the will, we must say that the renovation of the will retained its importance in Trilling's thinking till the end of his life. In a lecture that he gave at the University of Virginia shortly before his death, he said he considered himself a nineteenth-century person because he still believed in the efficacy of the will.

He got on to the subject of structuralism; and concluded by saying that thirty years ago he had fought against Stalinism and that he would, if he were young, fight structuralism as another system antithetical to will and individual freedom. 73

Trilling reveals in his liberal humanism, as does E.M. Forster in his, the characteristic contemporary restlessness before absolute values. "Lord, I disbelieve—Help thou my Unbelief," was Forster's prayer. 74 Trilling refuses to consider religion to be a necessary condition of great literature; in fact, he thinks it "an impropriety to try to guarantee literature by religious belief." 75 The job of renovating the will is then to be accomplished


by "discourse and letters," unaided or rather unencumbered by positive religious commitment. Trilling's position now would seem to be essentially that of his protagonist John Laskell in The Middle of the Journey—not conservatism nor the old liberalism which blames every lapse of the individual on society but a New Liberalism—a delicate balance between individual responsibility and social and historical determinism.

R.W.B. Lewis, in a review of The Liberal Imagination, calls Trilling's liberalism, his centrist position with its "note of noble sadness, its sustained tensions and its qualities of tolerance and endurance,"—Lewis calls this "the new Stoicism." This new Stoicism is not a program for creative action, but a device for shoring up defenses. It is a plan for holding one's own. It cannot conclude in what Mr Trilling looks for, the renovation of the will for the benefit of art and life, though it may succeed in piling up enough sandbags for the will to endure a little longer.  

It is not narrow or blind and it has its variety of courage. But it inevitably results in a kind of distortion and discouragement. For,

what we lack in our society is not so much class and manners as a ritual investment of daily and

critical behavior whereby we announce our awareness of the relationship between the human and the more than human—the theme of the greatest literature at all times. . . . what we are apt to get from the Stoic reinforcement of the will is a heightening of tragic pity, the sense of identity with the human sufferer; but a lowering of tragic terror, the acknowledgment of the secret cause. 77

This, of course, as we shall see in the concluding chapter, is not the final truth about Trilling. But it seems a quite adequate representation of and a fair comment on Trilling's position during the nineteen forties, the decade during which the essays collected in The Liberal Imagination were originally written. In other words, Trilling's liberalism at this stage has led him to a state which is wary of any commitment or even hope, a negative state of passive waiting, because the hope or the commitment might be for the wrong thing. Another motion, this time towards authenticity, and more problems.