



## Life With Lionel

by Kenneth S. Lynn

The New York intellectuals of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s were "overbearing and arrogant, excessively competitive; they lacked magnanimity and often they lacked common courtesy," Diana Trilling recalls in her startling memoir of her marriage to the celebrated literary critic Lionel Trilling.<sup>1</sup> Once at a *Partisan Review* party, she came up behind her husband just in time to block his physically violent response to the critic Alfred Kazin's intolerably insulting demand, "When are you going to dissociate yourself from that wife of yours?" Behind Kazin's rudeness, it would appear, lay a resentment of Mrs. Trilling's arguments about the extent to which cultural Stalinism had dominated supposedly enlightened thinking in America in the years before the Second World War. As her infuriated husband raised his arm to chastise his questioner, she restrained him—"perhaps mistakenly," she adds, for neither old age nor blindness has dimmed the proverbial intransigence of her spirit.

At times, the combativeness of the intellectuals crossed the line into viciousness, as Mrs. Trilling demonstrates in her account of their treatment of Norman Podhoretz and his success-oriented autobiographical volume *Making It*. In the early days of his editorship of *Commentary*, Podhoretz was on the left. Political congeniality, however, did not deter his circle of liberal friends and

acquaintances from setting upon him, once *Making It* appeared, like a pack of wild dogs in a Jack London story. *Making It* "was a crudely boastful book," Mrs. Trilling concedes. Yet she leaves no doubt of her distaste for the insensate nature of the assaults on Podhoretz. "From the reviews," she writes, "one might have supposed that he had written *Mein Kampf*."

That Lionel Trilling also distanced himself from the piling on was not merely because Podhoretz had been one of his most brilliant students at Columbia. Not



for nothing had the grace, moderation, and good manners of Professor Trilling become a perennial topic of conversation in Morningside Heights cafeterias. These qualities of his personality and even of his work were noted not only by the colleagues who revered him and the students who turned him into a father figure, but by hostile critics like the poet Delmore Schwartz, who regarded gentility as indicative of a wish to evade the harsher realities of social experience.

In light of this widespread agreement about Trilling's nature, it comes as a shock to find Mrs. Trilling declaring that grace, moderation, and good manners are not the qualities for which her

husband would have most wished to be remembered, for they had "little bearing" on his thought and they spoke "not at all" to his essentially tragic view of life. There were "many contradictions" in his character, she insists, even though they may not have been visible in the classroom or in casual social encounters. But they have their place, she implacably concludes, in "our understanding of why he wrote as he did."

Reality was the watchword of his writing and the test by which he measured the intellectual soundness of the life-view that engaged him above all others: the liberal imagination. Whether or not he would ultimately have welcomed the compliment, a good many of his judgments were pioneering expressions of neoconservative criticism. In dealing with the politics of the left, he repeatedly rejected its constructs of the contemporary social world and its dreams of achievable social perfection as denials of the complexity and variousness of life. The first thing we are supposed to understand about Mrs. Trilling's memoir, I believe, is that her husband's willingness to take issue with the left's incorrigible wish for an unconditioned universe began at home, so to speak. Out of painful grapplings with his own complexity and variousness in a context of excruciatingly difficult family relationships, he developed his sense of life as a tragedy. Unfortunately, in Mrs. Trilling's view, he took pains to conceal from his worshipful admirers the human fallibilities that ultimately drove him into psychoanalysis and kept him there for the rest of his days. More royalist than the king, the author of *The Beginning of the Journey* declares on page two that "I am reality-bound," as she sets out to destroy the image of Lionel Trilling as someone immune to profanation.

<sup>1</sup>Diana Trilling, *The Beginning of the Journey: The Marriage of Diana and Lionel Trilling*. Harcourt Brace & Company, 442 pp., \$24.95.

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For starters, she tells us that he was "maddened by his father's unreality." As a consequence of Lionel's birth, Dave Trilling had relinquished his tailoring business to become a manufacturer of men's fur-lined coats because he didn't wish his son to have to say that his father was a tailor. Alas, he never again earned a reliable living. In the early days of the Great Depression, Lionel was a lowly college instructor on annual appointment; yet he had to support his parents and his sister, as well as his wife, who was chronically ill. One day, he bought himself a much-needed suit, at Macy's, for \$29.95. That night, his father looked it over. "Son," he said at last, "don't you think that a man in your position owes it to himself to have a tailor-made suit?"

Another of Dave's charms was his violent temper. Although it was usually directed at his wife, Lionel grew up in its "savage orbit." At table, the parents communicated through the children. ("Lionel, ask your father if he wants another piece of chicken.") As for Diana's relationship with Dave, she "disliked almost everything about him"—his pieties, his hypochondria, his self-absorption, his trivial conceits, and most of all, his self-pity. Toward the end of his life, she sneeringly reports, he "thought himself surrounded by murderous enemies." (In another heartless sentence, she lets us know that en route by ambulance to the nursing home where he would die, he wept and screamed the whole way.)

Lionel's mother was "strikingly selfish and self-concerned in her rearing of her son, cruelly insensitive to his young pride. In her financial dependence upon us, she was more than selfish, greedy. She made great difficulty for us in the early crucial years of our marriage." Nevertheless, there was much to love and respect in her, in Diana's opinion. But not in Lionel's. Even though he finally managed to acknowledge that she played an important part in encouraging him as a writer, "there remained a hard primitive core of hostility in his relation to her." Were his "unprovoked rages" at Diana circuitously connected to his feelings about his mother? As a veteran of decades and decades of psychoanalysis, the octogenarian memoirist clearly believes that this was so.

In a self-pitying elaboration of her marital woes, she declares that her sensi-

tive-looking husband, whom their close friends thought of as the most peaceable of men and most devoted of husbands, indulged in "annihilating verbal assaults" on her. He accused her of being the worst person he had ever met and of having ruined his life, while she in turn was sure that whenever he fell for no perceptible reason into an extreme bleakness of mood he acted toward her as though she were the cause of all his descents into despondency.

Her own emotional problems surfaced in the summer of 1929. It was the summer of their marriage, and she and Lionel were living in a hilltop cabin in Westport, Connecticut. When for any reason she was left alone, she felt strangely uneasy. Two years later, she experienced her first full-blown panic. As she lay in bed waiting for sleep, she was overwhelmed by terror. Further panics attacked her thereafter with demoralizing frequency, and her fear of being alone entrenched itself. She wanted Lionel to be with her always. Moreover, she wanted him to be more commanding, more in charge of

her. "I wanted him," she finally blurts out, "to be more like my father. . . . I wanted him to be the chaperon my father had been." The spring of 1933 was a particularly bad time. Her father had died a few months before, and she was politically bereft as well. For after an enthralling involvement in the Communist movement—to which she and Lionel had been converted two years earlier by the redoubtable Sidney Hook—they had both become disillusioned. Consequently, "I had nothing to fill my days and, like an unhappy adolescent, I stayed in bed half the morning." Lionel's sister, Harriet, would bring her breakfast in bed around nine or ten, and sometimes Lionel would. "I tried to be grateful for his kindness," she writes, "but in my heart I accused him, as I accused Harriet, of invaliding me." Did Lionel, one wonders, sense how she felt, even as he was waiting on her?

Throughout this entire period of psychological crisis, she also was afflicted by physical problems, of which the worst was a severe hyperthyroidism. Following the second of two major operations for this life-threatening condition, she

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steadily regained her strength, but never wholly regained her health. "I have, in fact, never since . . . had a day in which I felt wholly well."

Medical and psychiatric bills massively compounded their financial problems. If it had not been for the money Diana's father left her, "we would have sunk under the weight of our indebtedness." Over the years they constantly borrowed money to stay afloat. Not until 1970—when they were in their mid-sixties!—did they pay off the last of their loans. In part, their own improvidence, especially about expenditures for food, was to blame for their need for deficit financing. They both lacked "good sense," Mrs. Trilling admits, as she recalls the three-rib roasts of beef that they served to friends in the depths of the Depression. Yet she at least was willing to face up to the responsibility of paying bills at the end of the month and verifying bank balances, whereas Lionel took no interest in such matters. And never had, she further states. For when he went to college, his parents had never required him, despite their straitened circumstances, to contribute in any way to the cost of his education.

His financial innocence was symbolic of other disconnections from life. Because he and Diana "were afraid to be fully grown up and to be in command of ourselves and others," they put off having a child (who is all but totally ignored in this memoir) until the twentieth year of their marriage. The prospect of foreign travel—of being removed, that is, from familiar surroundings—likewise filled Lionel with dread. On the trips to Europe that he finally began to make in his forties, he went alone and did next to no sightseeing, preferring instead to visit English literary acquaintances. When in later years he and Diana went together, she had to make all the arrangements, from hotel and restaurant reservations to sightseeing plans. Once, in Venice, she exasperatedly handed him a stack of guidebooks and demanded that he arrange their schedule for the day, only to hear him propose at the end of half an hour that they might visit St. Mark's. Similar attacks of paralysis occurred whenever he dined in a restaurant. Upon being presented with a menu, he would infallibly order something he didn't want.

Trilling lived, in short, in a world of ideas. Yet he wished with all his heart that fate had dealt him a different hand to play. "Any kind of action," Mrs. Trilling writes, "had a special charm for him. War, politics, business, finance: all of these were for Lionel the 'real' world." Bizarrely enough, he "enjoyed" the clamorous student rebellion at Columbia in the late sixties, for as a member of a three-man faculty committee to deal with the emergency, he was on campus around the clock for three days, returning home to sleep for only an hour or two. Here at last was "real" life!

In the most arresting pages of *The Beginning of the Journey*, Mrs. Trilling portrays her husband's acute unhappiness at not being able to break away from academia and make a career as a novelist. She begins by quoting the despairing words he set down in his journal in 1933, at age 28, after his friend Clifton Fadiman had shown him a letter he had received from Ernest Hemingway:

A crazy letter, written when he was, drunk—self-revealing, arrogant, scared, trivial, absurd: yet felt from reading it how right such a man is compared to the "good minds" of my university life—how he will produce and mean something to the world . . . how his life which he could expose without dignity and which is anarchic and "childish" is a better life than anyone I know could live, and right for his job. And how far-far I am going from being a writer—and how less and less I have the material and the mind and the will. A few—very few—more years and the chance will be gone.

As a young man who came of age in the high noon of the speakeasy era, 1926, Trilling, too, was "frequently . . . drunk," according to *The Beginning of the Journey*. In his middle years, he had a drinking problem, in the sense that the negligible amounts of alcohol that he consumed were sufficient to alter his behavior in unfortunate ways. But so far as Mrs. Trilling knows, he never wrote a letter to someone while under the influence, certainly not to a stranger, as Fadiman was a stranger to Hemingway. Professor Lionel Trilling, after all, had a reputation for grace, moderation, and good manners to maintain. Only a reader

of his journal could have known of the professor's anguished belief that the booze-haunted, arrogant, scared life of the author of *In Our Time* and *The Sun Also Rises* was a "better life than anyone I know could live."

Trilling's obsession with Hemingway surfaced again in his journal on July 3, 1961:

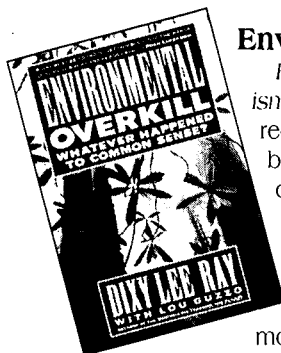
Death of Ernest Hemingway. Except Lawrence's death 32 years ago, no writer's death has moved me as much—who would suppose how much he haunted me? How much he existed in my mind—as a reproach? He was the only writer of our time I envied. I respected him in his most foolish postures and in his worst work (except *The Old Man and the Sea*).

Trilling's wonderfully endowed mind had led him into a life of intellectual dedication, but "in the dark recesses of his heart where unhappiness was so often his companion," he was "contemptuous" of his achievements, his widow assures us. In 1950, three years after the appearance of Trilling's one and only novel, *The Middle of the Journey*, the *New Yorker* published Lillian Ross's profile of Hemingway's recent visit to New York. It was a pitilessly accurate portrait of a magnificent wreck of a man who talked in pseudo-Indian-chief English in between heroic intakes of champagne and whiskey. "Lionel all but flung the magazine at me," Mrs. Trilling remembers. In a voice that was tense with bitterness he exclaimed, "And you expect me to be a novelist!"

In a journal entry of 1949 or thereabouts, Trilling referred to his "continuing sense that wickedness—or is it my notion of courage—is essential for creation." Wickedness versus decency. Dictates of impulse versus calls of conscience. Creative writing versus criticism. Trilling's choices in these matters led to an important life, but left him with a devastating awareness of a lack of inner freedom. Is it any wonder that in some of his most compelling essays he wrote about literary heroes—Huck Finn was one of them and the "dingy little London bookbinder" in Henry James's *The Princess Casamassima* was another—who also were torn apart by the morally critical decisions with which they were faced? □

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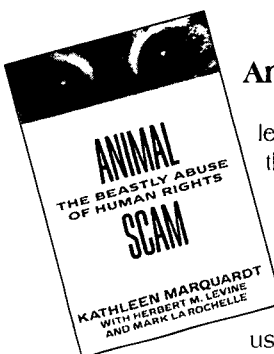
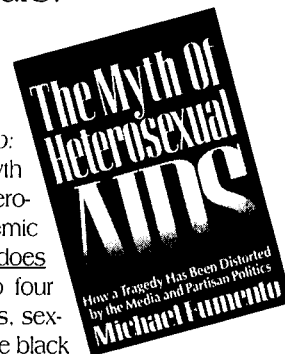
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## Trixie

by Benjamin J. Stein

*Saturday*

A gigantic wrestling match at the gymnasium of the junior high school here in Sandpoint, Idaho. I'm here with little Gorgeous George because his pal, 9-year-old Alex, and Alex's sister Rachel, age 12, are here. Alex is wrestling in a tournament for all of North Idaho, and Tommy is watching fixedly. There are about 500 boys competing, and, as far as I can tell, each and every child has at least two parents and several brothers and sisters. They are from towns I've never heard of in the forests east of Coeur d'Alene, like Post Falls, Rathdrum, and St. Marie's. Also from Priest River, which I have heard of.

The kids are all suited up, trying to look brave, and then hurling themselves at their opponents like mad, wrestling very, very hard for a few minutes, and then stopping.

On the gym floor, there are dozens of mats, and about twelve matches are going on at once. Tommy's been running around with Rachel, keyed up like mad waiting for Alex to wrestle, and I've been noticing a few things.

First, there isn't one yuppie in the crowd. These people look like every one of them could fix a flat tire, change the oil, and skin a mule in the dark. They also look extremely calm. There is a certain concern about the kids, but basically these are calm faces.

There's also no fear in the room. No one is afraid that if his son wins a match, the other boy's homies are going to be waiting for him outside with a gun. Also, I notice that when boys lose their matches, they often cry, at least at the younger ages. They were obviously not hurt physically, but they cry perhaps to ward off imagined criticism. It's like my wife

Alex's observation that kids cry when their mothers are volunteering at school, but not otherwise. Crying is largely a tool to manipulate others, not to express sorrow. That's my theory, anyway.

But the main thing I notice is that even I, a novice at wrestling, can tell who's going to win each match just by the looks on the kids' faces. The tough, mean-looking ones almost always beat the ones with any trace of sensitivity. It's amazing how predictive that is. On the other hand, the sensitive-looking ones can become editors and lawyers and doctors—then we'll see who wins the matches.

After lunch, little Hulk Hogan and I set out to find Priest Lake, supposedly a beautiful town forty miles north of the now legendary Priest River north and east of Sandpoint.

Frankly, I'm excited. I want to see this new, large lake. As Tommy and I hurtled along the road, a cold wind began to whip through the trees. We passed a steaming, hissing sawmill at Laclede, and then saw snow flurries when we got near Priest River, on the powerful Pend Oreille River. Hmmm.

Tommy began to ask me questions. How do atom bombs work? How do hydrogen bombs work? What is energy? What is mass? I answered them as best I could, as we roared north toward Coolin, a town just south of Priest Lake.

Now there was not only a good-sized flurry, but also a fog. With the fog, the flurry, and the big trees, the sun was largely blocked. I could see that the road, a two-lane blacktop, was getting very shiny. Tommy began to sing songs from "Ren and Stimpy," our absolutely favorite cartoon, about a dog and cat who live together in a trailer.

We passed by a beautiful ruined barn in a meadow with snow flurries and fog around it. I stopped the car to take pic-

tures. "Daddy, I want to look, too," little Ansel Adams said. We stood by the side of the road and watched the beauty of North Idaho, with nary a human in sight.

Out of nowhere, a battered red pickup came up from the south. A grizzled-looking driver with two mutts slowed down, looked at us, and drove on a hundred yards. Then he slowly backed up and headed towards us.

Oh, boy, I thought. This is it. I'm dead meat. This man is a scout from The Aryan Resistance and he's seen me intruding on their Magic Kingdom and now he's going to kill me. I'd better hide my son.

The man instead rolled down his window, smiled a snaggle-toothed grin, and asked, "Are you all right? You need any help with your car?"

"I'm fine," I said. "Thank you very, very much for asking. I really appreciate it."

"Take care," he said with a wave of his callused hand, and then moved on down the road.

So much for my crazed fantasies. We got back into the car and headed north, ever north, towards Coolin. Suddenly, as we entered a downhill curve, the car swerved out of control toward a ditch. Then it got back under control, and then swerved again. We were on ice. I was scared.

Not only that, but it was almost dark, virtually instantaneously. Little Fearless, however, was not at all fazed. He asked me how a jet engine worked, how a car worked, and why a submarine didn't sink.

While answering, I decided to turn around without seeing Coolin. I wanted to get back to The Edgewater Inn, and fast. I wanted to be somewhere warm and safe. I didn't want to skid into a ditch on Highway 30 to Coolin.

On the way back, we kept slipping ever so slightly on the road. I slowed down to a crawl, but we still were skidding. I was very scared.

*Benjamin J. Stein is a writer, actor, economist, and lawyer living in Malibu, California.*