

Arma Virumque Cano

Machiavelli puts aside his reading of
Vergil. He stares out at the grey
January drizzle.

Sant' Andrea da Percussina, 1517

*A prince . . . should rather wish to possess a corrupt
city, not to ruin it wholly like Caesar, but to
reorganize it like Romulus. For certainly the
heavens cannot afford a man a greater opportunity of
glory."*

—Discourses I, 10.

When I sing of arms and the man, I sing
of unspeakable acts, cruelty, horrors,
women borne from burning houses, raped
before their dying husbands, babes
pulped against stone, all images
of religion cast down, the sea covered
with ships full of exiles, the shores
stained with blood.

This was the sin of Caesar: ambition
crumbled his city's stones like bread
on his charismatic tongue. He loved those
he could call on: Rome's army, *vox populi*.
Preserving his scheming body in their mouths,
the intoxicated crowd cried, "Take up and wear
the Tarquin purple, praise be to you, Gaius Iulius
Caesar, honor us with thy glorious name, sacred Caesar."

Finally, Caesar, staggering alone across the courtyard,
divine blood squeezing from a dozen tight-lipped
dagger wounds, lifted his eyes to friend Brutus,
good Brutus, honorable Brutus who chose
to lose honor imitating his ancient father,
his namesake, founder of the Republic,
who so loved Rome that he executed
his only begotten sons.

—David Swickard

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The Ambivalences and Ambiguities of Lionel Trilling

Milton Birnbaum

The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind, at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.

—F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Crack-Up*

Lionel Trilling and the Fate of Cultural Criticism, by Mark Krupnick, *Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1986. 207 pp. \$21.95 (paper \$10.95).*

CLASSIFYING LIONEL TRILLING (1905–1975) as a cultural critic is not an easy task. It depends upon which Trilling is being referred to. In his book Mark Krupnick speaks of “two Trillings.” Actually there were several. In his early days he was mildly a Marxist and a Communist sympathizer. He later turned bitterly against the Communists, especially those who espoused Stalinism. At one point in his career he was critical of William D. Howells for being rather bland about the rigors of existence; he subsequently praised Howells’s benignity and his endorsement of the more pleasant aspects of American society. At times Trilling seemed to embrace an instinctual freedom from restraints of all kinds. Then, again, he echoed a yearning for cessation from involvements and expressed an almost Whitmanesque desire for a “soothing Death.”

Like the major character, Robin, in one of Trilling’s favorite short stories (Haw-

thorne’s “My Kinsman, Major Molineux”), Trilling learned that a man may “have several voices . . . as well as two complexions.” He was tempted by the siren calls of opposing voices—the Dionysian and Apollonian; the Marxist and the Freudian; Eros and Thanatos. Sometimes these opposing pulls coexisted simultaneously, although somewhat uneasily. At other times there was a confusing shift in attitudes as Trilling sought to crystallize his essential self. Perhaps these ambivalences and conversions may have originated in the shifting fortunes and different forces found in the lives of his parents. His father, who was born in Poland and had studied to be a rabbi, became an affluent manufacturer of fur coats and “clothier to fashionable men about town.” This affluence disappeared, however, when the father lost his money in the 1929 Crash. Trilling’s mother, whose parents had come from Eastern Europe, was raised in London, and though later she emigrated to the United States, she taught her son and her daughter the proprieties of Victorian conduct and a love for Victorian literature.

Partially as a result of his parental inheritance, Trilling was never quite sure as to which world he would be most comfort-