

The Opposing Selves of Lionel Trilling

John Rodden

FOR ALMOST A quarter-century, until his death at the age of seventy in November 1975, Lionel Trilling was the reigning presence in the American literary intelligentsia. More than the loss of a major critic, his departure was memorialized on both sides of the Atlantic, in wistful and even elegiac tones as the passing of an era, eliciting a front-page obituary notice in the *New York Times* and a poetic flight from Robert Conquest:

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

The relations among literature, politics, and society were Trilling's main preoccupation, with particular emphasis on problems of the self, character, identity, and tragedy. Trilling was a cultural critic, stationed always near "the dark and bloody crossroads where literature and politics meet," and he produced the most important body of American cultural criticism of the century. Indeed, Trilling stands with Van Wyck Brooks, Edmund Wilson, Kenneth Burke, T.S. Eliot, F.R. Leavis, Raymond Williams, and Northrop Frye among the most influential English-language critics of the twentieth century. His Columbia University

colleague Jacques Barzun has gone so far as to call him "one of the great critics" in the tradition of English men of letters, ranking him just behind Hazlitt in the company of Coleridge, Bagehot, and Arnold.

Six book-length critical studies of Trilling's work have already appeared, and at least three biographies are presently under way. No event signified more clearly Trilling's unique status than the almost immediate posthumous publication of a Uniform Edition of his *oeuvre*, edited by his widow Diana and printed between 1977 and 1980 in twelve volumes by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. He is the only American literary academic ever to receive such an honor.

How could a professor of English—one who exhibited little interest in literary theory, never developed a critical "method," established no school or movement, never even published a full-length critical work beyond his dissertation on Matthew Arnold, and indeed never even considered himself a "critic"—achieve such eminence? That is the question this essay in reconsideration seeks to illuminate: the irony of why the man who disavowed the name of critic has been exalted by fellow critics as the great American cultural critic of the century.

Two sets of related issues merit special attention. First, it is instructive to highlight the sociological conditions of Trilling's reputation, which the critical studies have not emphasized. (Several specific institutional, literary-cultural, and personal factors shaped Trilling's reception and have fueled the controversies associated with his bequest.) Second, it is helpful to trace the chronological progress of Trilling's critical reception, giving special emphasis to the shifting contexts and key episodes in the history of his reputation. Our exploration of the vicissitudes of Trilling's reputation discloses much about the fate of modern literary criticism and the sea change in the politics of the American literary academy during the last half century.

I

To comprehend the circumstances of Trilling's career and reputation one must appreciate that New York, the undisputed intellectual capital of the nation before the postwar expansion of American universities, constituted the foundation and horizon of Trilling's world. A native New York Jew, Trilling lived in Manhattan all his life and spent virtually his entire fifty-year writing career (1921-1975) as a Columbia University student and faculty member. This context warrants emphasis, because a main reason for Trilling's once unrivaled prestige in American intellectual life has to do with his geographical-institutional location and professional affiliations.

Chief among these factors was Trilling's unique position as a celebrated Columbia professor and prominent member of the (anti-Stalinist—and primarily Jewish) group of New York intellectuals who wrote for *Partisan Review*, the premier American intellectual magazine of the wartime and early postwar period. Trilling was the first tenured Jew in a

nationally-ranked English department, and his rise to prominence cannot be understood apart from the wider success of the New York intellectuals and the complicated saga of Jewish assimilation in American culture. Philip Rieff spoke for many intellectuals when he once called Trilling "our teacher" and dubbed him a "Jew of Culture."

Several of Trilling's books were reviewed by friends and associates, some of the reviews appearing in publications for which Trilling himself regularly wrote or served as a contributing editor. Personal acquaintances who reviewed Trilling's books include *Partisan Review* editor William Phillips, Columbia classmate Clifton Fadiman, Columbia colleague Morton Dauwen Zabel, and former Columbia student Norman Podhoretz. The publications crucial to the formation of Trilling's reputation included *The New Republic* and *The Nation*, for which he regularly reviewed in the 1930s; and *Partisan Review* and *Kenyon Review*, on whose editorial boards he served.

Although Trilling founded no school nor directly cultivated any disciples, some of his best students have gone on to become well-known poets (Allen Ginsberg, John Hollander, Richard Howard), academic and intellectual authorities (Steven Marcus, Quentin Anderson, Norman Podhoretz), and prominent men in the publishing world (Jason Epstein, Sol Stein, Gilman Kraft). Their successes raised Trilling's own reputation and facilitated his smooth traversing of academic, intellectual, and publishing circles (e.g., his membership on the editorial review boards of *Partisan Review* and *Kenyon Review*, his respected status within the American Psychoanalytical Association, his supervisory roles in the Reader's Subscription and Mid-Century book clubs). His prominent positions in these overlapping spheres were mu-

tually reinforcing, transforming him by the mid-1950s into America's first academic celebrity in the humanities.

To emphasize Trilling's distinctive affiliations, which placed him at the center of American intellectual life, is not to undervalue his literary achievement. His remarkable gifts as an autobiographical essayist and cultural critic were crucial reasons why he, rather than another New York academic intellectual (e.g., Sidney Hook, Richard Hofstadter), emerged at mid century as the leading representative of intellectual America. Although Trilling taught English literature at Columbia for four decades, he was never chiefly a scholar writing in professional journals, or concerned with the academic discipline of literary studies. He was, rather, a man of letters addressing himself in magazine essays to a general literate audience.

Trilling's national stature and confidently high self-regard were reflected in his much-remarked habit of casually speaking in the first person plural, whereby he discussed personal concerns as if they were large cultural issues, a practice that grated on some ears in later years. But during the two decades of his greatest influence, from the late 1940s to the early 1960s, his rare facility for dramatizing his divided self on paper did indeed make his often idiosyncratic preoccupations seem matters of general consequence. It was also during this period that Trilling's brilliant rhetorical skills were on fullest display. A number of his lapidary formulations ("moral realism," "the liberal imagination," "the conditioned life," "the opposing self," "beyond culture," "the disintegrated consciousness," "the adversary culture," "the shaped self") at once entered the intellectual lexicon, soon becoming shorthand words for the postwar *Zeitgeist* and a terminological hub around which New York in-

tellectual debates raged.

Trilling began as an intellectual biographer (of Matthew Arnold) and writer of fiction, but after mid-century he channeled these talents into cultural criticism. Still, the former two roles distinguished him among the New York intellectuals and conditioned his peculiar intellectual temperament—as well as giving some readers discomfort. While acknowledging Trilling's pioneering role in American intellectual life, some observers have commented on a quality of the enigmatic, the elusive, the slightly vexing—even the vaguely suspect—in Trilling's style and work. For Trilling operated by indirection, and his occasionally labyrinthine subtleties bewildered or baffled less nuanced critics, especially in the ideologically polarized climate of postwar New York. As Steven Marcus once put it: "He never says straight out what he means."

The remark exaggerates, but only to make the point that Trilling's aversion to ideology was so strong that he foreswore even the art of the polemic. (Diana Trilling customarily assumed that task.) With a novelist's sensitivity to the tremors of the literary scene, Trilling developed rather into a cultural seismographer, divining the significance of each quiver and flutter in intellectual New York, and guiding his fellow intellectuals toward more secure ground.

Trilling's dialectical sensibility rendered him an "opposing self" ever in pursuit of Arnoldian balance and capable always (merely, as it were, by introspection) of discerning the right moment to apply the cultural corrective. This carefully calibrated sensibility rarely seemed to be overtly "for" or "against" any trend or movement for any duration. But time and again Trilling sounded the charge (albeit always in muted tones) that led his generation toward new intellectual terrain—whether toward psycho-

analysis and the late Freud, a revaluation of realist fiction and bourgeois values, or the problematics of the modern novel. Trilling became, in Alfred Kazin's phrase, "an Emersonian teacher of the Tribe."

Because Trilling himself preferred the "bloody crossroads" rather than nakedly ideological territory, he rarely advanced to the political front of Left sectarian warfare with his more combative New York colleagues. Instead he was content to stay behind, continuing to work as herald and surveyor. That he claimed for himself these special tasks was often not well understood in New York. And so his summons to charge in a new direction was instead interpreted, especially after 1955 by younger critics, as a call of the Sirens to political retreat. And this suspicion of rightward leanings gave rise, in turn, to controversy about the conservative implications of Trilling's cultural analyses, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, when the neoconservative movement claimed him as an ancestor. Still, so finely modulated were Trilling's essays ("ideas in modulation" was another of his verbal icons) that he usually managed, at least until the late 1960s, to seem both one step ahead of his intellectual colleagues and yet forever the voice of moderation.

Fellow intellectuals did not always appreciate fully the ambivalent character and genuinely dialectical movement of Trilling's mind. Like Freud, his great culture hero, Trilling's thinking remained dynamic and self-critical, always moving toward some new yet invariably provisional and revisable synthesis. What for Trilling was always a tentative formulation, however, became for more ideologically minded intellectuals an established doctrine. Frequently, Trilling's dissenting positions did more than ultimately prevail in New York; they turned into a new consensus, first on liberalism, then on psychoanalysis, and

finally on the counterculture. Inevitably, critics then sought to fix him at that moment and in that position, pronouncing him a forerunner, ally, turncoat, or traitor.

Indeed his record as a trend-spotter and -setter was uncanny. That record serves as another notable factor in the general perception of Trilling's status as *primus inter pares* among the New York intellectuals. During the war years he anticipated what became their collective turn toward a conservatized liberalism, achieved via his call for a marriage of politics and art, *i.e.*, for the nuanced, complex "literary imagination" of writers like E.M. Forster to enrich the doctrinaire "liberal imagination" of Marxism. After the war he taught his colleagues a new respect for old virtues, *i.e.*, middle-class (and Trillingesque) values such as decency and propriety, exemplified by his praise of "old-fashioned" figures like William Dean Howells and George Orwell. In the 1950s he introduced them to the "tragic" side of Freud, drawing their attention to Freud's stoical character and to the limits of social engineering implied by *Civilization and Its Discontents*.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Trilling pioneered a new, expanded role for the literary critic: cultural conscience. The shift was prompted by his dismay over the abandonment of that role by the decade's avant-garde artists. Their reaction against Establishment rigidities turned them, in Trilling's view, into disciples of the orthodox "adversary culture" of intellectual and campus radicals, who by legitimizing within academe the formerly subversive avant-garde had thereby domesticated it. Finally, the passing of the vogue for avant-garde literary theory and the turn back toward cultural criticism in the late 1980s may even be traced, from the standpoint of the mid-1990s, to Trilling's hostility to post-Freudian "revisionary

madness" (in the work of Norman O. Brown, R.D. Laing, and their continental counterparts) and to his scattered remarks in defense of the "shaped self" and his criticism of structuralism and other anti-humanist attempts to subordinate literature to system.

Although attention to Trilling's professional advantages and his *oeuvre* is certainly justified, acquaintances such as Irving Howe and William Barrett retained the conviction that the telling clue to his influence in New York lay beyond his concrete accomplishments. For them, it had rather to do with something tacit and even ineffable: a quality of human presence. Or to put it differently: Trilling's achievement was less a professional or literary than a human one. And such an intuition must affect, if always uncertainly and imprecisely, any explanation of Trilling's reputation. For reputation emerges not merely from organizational position or literary response but from human interaction. The man, and the man within the writings, has always played a significant role in critics' estimates of Trilling's work.

The tributes to Trilling's prose style are frequent. And yet, however admiring are acquaintances' comments about Trilling the writer, the feeling persists: the man was more important than the work. Outstanding as it is, the core of the *oeuvre*—notwithstanding dozens of interesting short reviews and occasional pieces—is small: a handful of short stories and an early novel, a published dissertation and a short work of biographical criticism, four collections of essays, a few published lectures. Moreover, the virtues cited as characteristic of the writer's style have all been claimed as the man's personal qualities: grace, elegance, urbanity, subtlety, sweetness, kindness, wit, modesty, civility, diffidence. And so too have the prose defi-

ciencies been cited as personal attributes: ponderousness, self-consciousness, fastidiousness, evasiveness. Admirers note that even Trilling's physical appearance and personal manner—the long white hair and deep-set eyes, the hesitant delivery, the relaxed formality, the gracious curiosity, the courtly insistence on decorum, the seigneurial aplomb—radiated a sense of quiet importance. Less flattering observers have interpreted these same habits as amiable aloofness, mannered cordiality, and aristocratic pretentiousness: marks of a stiff and stuffy self-importance.

Whatever the estimates of Trilling's character, the fact remains that, much as Trilling valued Freud more for his heroic life than for his elaborate metaphysical system, many readers of Trilling have esteemed him more for the image and voice he projected in his work than for the work itself. Or for how he seemed so perfectly to personify what he wrote, as if he were a walking avatar of the generously liberal imagination or opposing self, or as though his personality were specially crafted to illustrate his notion of the carefully shaped self. These admirers of Trilling acknowledge, between the lines and not without embarrassment, that the literary achievement by itself cannot explain the weight of significance that successive generations have bestowed upon him.

That judgment derives, however, less from shortcomings in the work than from strengths in the man. For Trilling had *style*—"style that seemed to be second nature with the man himself," as William Barrett put it in his New York memoir, *Adventures Among the Intellectuals* (1982). Musing on an old photograph of Trilling, in the unfamiliar scene of a bowling alley, Barrett added:

I had never seen him bowl, and did not know that he indulged, but there in this

unsuspecting setting the familiar and natural grace of the man seems to overflow the picture. For the public at large, of course, this grace showed itself principally in his writing: he wrote possibly the best critical prose of his time—supple, flexible, fluent, yet firm. But the inherent gracefulness of the man came out also in a multitude of small ways. In a casual letter or note, for example, there would always be some distinctive touch of style, though never labored—the personal voice of the man without being affected, overassertive, or strident.... This gracefulness was, I think, something of a moral quality, or at least allied to the moral character of the man himself.

The natural grace of the man also overflows the writings, whatever the truth of Buffon's *le style c'est l'homme*. Even for someone of my university generation of the mid-1970s, the outline of Barrett's portrait of the man is traceable in the writer's work. I came to Trilling's books only after his death and outside the New York milieu, and my sole, wispy thread of connection to him is that my dissertation advisor, Walter Sokel, was his student and colleague in the 1950s. And yet, a feeling of intellectual kinship and of having inherited an intellectual trust abides. If Trilling possessed a mind more restricted in range than those critical geniuses with whom he is often compared, the Wilsons and Leavises and Fries, he nevertheless confronted problems in a deeply personal way. In making them his own, he somehow managed to live them out in his literary persona as well as in his personal relationships. And his work invites an intensely personal response in the reader, similarly engaged in the struggle of shaping a self in a skeptical modern (or postmodern) age.

Trilling's weakness notwithstanding, I find it all the more inspiring that he made the most of his abilities; his narrowness issues forth in rich insight, and finally gives even the appearance of openness

and breadth. Somehow an awareness of his "ordinariness" humanizes him. I think of Trilling's own exhilarating assessment (in his introduction to *Homage to Catalonia*) of Orwell's severe limitations: "He is not a genius—what a relief! What an encouragement. For he communicates the sense to us that what he has done, anyone of us could do."

That statement, of course, is an exaggeration—for Orwell and Trilling were surely two of the most intelligent persons of their generation. But the formulation heightens appreciation of their literary achievement and brings consideration of it full circle. In the end, one need pass no verdict on which, the *oeuvre* or the author, is the greater. What is clear is that the books alone cannot account for Trilling's cultural influence or inspirational power. For Trilling was not just a major critic or an important man of letters. Nor even, as William Chace has noted, "a moralist, an historian of moral consciousness, or a philosopher of culture," but rather "a sensibility who cultivated thinking so that he might subsume it to the rhythms of his search for wisdom." It was this image of Trilling as a wise man that catapulted him to academic-intellectual celebrity. His greatest legacy is not that of a cultural critic, a critical humanist, a public intellectual, but of a teacher. His teaching was the pedagogy of the *noblesse*, and his theme was nothing less than a style of living: the question of how to live the intellectual life. His answer was his own life; he enacted his own modestly heroic style. In doing so he became, to use his own term for the intellectual hero, a "figure," one of those "whose lives are demonstrations of the principles which shaped their writing" and whose roles in their respective cultures are at least as important as

are their creative achievements.

II

The story of Lionel Trilling the writer begins in the mid-1920s, with his stories and reviews in the *Menorah Journal*, a Jewish magazine on which he served as an assistant editor. Already by the end of the decade, Trilling was known in Jewish literary circles in New York as a promising young intellectual. He started reviewing for *The Nation* and *The New Republic* in the early 1930s, during which time he briefly became involved with a Communist auxiliary organization; in 1939 he joined the full-time faculty at Columbia, developments which extended his reputation into academic and wider, non-Jewish, intellectual circles. But Trilling's public reputation among the critics—which can be divided into five phases—did not emerge until the early 1940s, after the appearance of *Matthew Arnold* (1939) and *E.M. Forster* (1943).

In the first stage of his critical reputation (1939-1945), Trilling became known as a biographer and scholar of Victorian and modern British literature. Filiation with Jewish culture and the *Menorah Journal* had given way to affiliation with English literature and Columbia. With a history of Jewish exclusion from the American literary academy behind him, and with Arnold's ideal of "disinterestedness" and Forster's "liberal imagination" constantly before him, Trilling exchanged his brief period of journalism and Marxism for academia and a cultural politics of the self. Trilling cherished Arnold for his subtle dialectical intelligence and insistence on balance; and he respected Forster's "moral realism," that steadfast critical intelligence which embraced the variousness of life, refused the oversimplifications of ideology, and heeded Montaigne's wise call to cultivate a mind

ondoyant et divers.

Critics celebrated the critical biography of Arnold for these same virtues. In hindsight, one can see that Edmund Wilson's flattering notice served as a virtual anointing. Always stingy with his kudos, Wilson lauded Trilling for writing "one of the first critical studies of any solidity and scope by an American of his generation." Coming as it did in the pages of *The New Republic*, the leading intellectual weekly of the liberal-Left, Wilson's tribute had the effect of elevating the 34-year-old Trilling to a commanding position among his academic and intellectual peers.

Even though *E. M. Forster* was a short book and much more modest in its aims, similar success followed. Morton Dauwen Zabel, Trilling's colleague in Columbia's English department, went so far in *The Nation* as to declare the publication of *E.M. Forster* a wartime contribution: "At this particular moment of literary and intellectual crisis, [it] becomes more than a literary occasion: it takes on the force of a public service." And a revealing sign that Trilling was gaining attention outside literary-academic circles was that he was reviewed, at length and quite favorably, in *Time*. It was his first notice in a mass-circulation periodical.

Trilling's influence in intellectual circles rose steeply after the war, reaching its summit in the early 1950s, after the publication of his most brilliant work, *The Liberal Imagination*. With this book, Trilling became a public intellectual and cold war liberal known to a wide audience outside New York. Indeed he emerged as the most distinguished critic of the postwar decade that Randall Jarrell would call "The Age of Criticism." The significant works of this fertile second phase of Trilling's critical reputation (1946-1955) are his single novel, *The Middle of the Journey* (1947), and his two

essay collections, *The Liberal Imagination* (1950) and *The Opposing Self* (1955). The background of these writings was the fierce wartime politicking over Stalinism. Within New York, the editors' choice of Trilling to introduce *The Partisan Review Reader* (1946) had already announced his position as the leading voice of the group. Critics' favorable responses to his own two essay collections affirmed this judgment to the wider public.

Although Trilling continued to write short stories during the war ("Of This Time, Of That Place," 1943; "The Other Margaret," 1945), he devoted chief attention after the war to *The Middle of the Journey*, a novel of ideas about Left intellectual life in the 1930s. The novel received mixed reviews. Robert Warshow, a younger New York critic and associate editor of *Commentary*, delivered the most severe verdict, claiming that it was not just that Trilling was a "minor talent," but rather that "Mr. Trilling has not yet solved the problem of being a novelist at all." Warshow's review aroused much controversy in New York, and it may be viewed as the first of many challenges to Trilling's growing reputation that would come in the next decade from a younger generation of New York intellectuals.

But critics united in their admiration for *The Liberal Imagination*. Clifton Fadiman took the opportunity to announce that Trilling as essayist, by virtue of his "moral seriousness," had already earned a place in the "family" tradition of Jonson, Dryden, Dr. Johnson, Hazlitt, Coleridge, Emerson, Arnold, and Eliot.

Trilling's delicate plea in *The Liberal Imagination* was that politics open itself to the wisdom and sensitivity of literature. The abstract, "liberal imagination" of the Popular Front days from the 1930s suffered precisely from a deficiency of imagination, rendering

it coarse and illiberal, argued Trilling. It therefore required an Arnoldian injection of the vivifying "literary imagination" to assist it toward approaching its balanced, healthy, ideal state of "variousness, possibility, complexity, difficulty." Already the Left's salute to *E.M. Forster* had made it clear that, even though overt political criticism of Stalinism during the war years was untimely, such a renovation of the liberal imagination was welcome.

This was all the more true by February 1950, when cold war tensions escalated sharply as Joseph McCarthy seized the national stage. *The Liberal Imagination* appeared two months later, just as the Red scare neared its peak, and some Left-liberals have suggested, in hindsight, that Trilling's essays attracted postwar liberals because they lent respectability to rightward 'retreat.' The essays appealed, Alfred Kazin later remarked, to "a generation that didn't want to resolve its contradictions—unwilling to become openly anti-liberal on the one hand but on the other hand eager to shake off with revulsion whatever connection it had with Marxism and all it represented." R.W.B. Lewis's 1950 essay-review in the *Hudson Review* represented the first intimation by a contemporary of Trilling's conservative instincts. Wrote Lewis: "Trilling, who doubts that there is a conservative tradition in America, feels so strongly the need for an enlightened opposition that he is impelled occasionally to enact that role himself."

During the next five years, the perception on the Left grew that Trilling was embracing such a role more from desire than duty, and the publication of *The Opposing Self* witnessed a revisionist turn and the first public sniping at him from within his intellectual circle, most notably from Delmore Schwartz. In *The Opposing Self*, Trilling redirected his attention from textual criticism to biog-

raphy, though this time interwoven with an element of hagiography. His work hereafter is less political and more explicitly literary-cultural.

The appearance of Trilling's next essay collection, *A Gathering of Fugitives* (1956), ushered in a third stage of his reputation (1956-1965), during which he gradually assumed the lofty twin roles of cultural sage and arbiter of public taste. Although his fame increased, he became less well-regarded in advanced literary intellectual circles. *A Gathering of Fugitives* represented the main literary outcome of Trilling's attempt during 1951-63, when he served on the editorial boards of the Reader's Subscription and Mid-Century book clubs, to educate a large public and to use cultural institutions to bridge the ever-growing chasm between high culture and "midcult." *A Gathering of Fugitives* consisted mostly of a selection of Trilling's monthly pieces written for the organ of the Reader's Subscription book club (managed by Sol Stein and Gilman Kraft), *The Griffin*.

With the ascendancy of the counterculture in the mid-1960s, representatives of the Arnoldian tradition fell into disfavor within the critical avant-garde—and the biographer of Arnold was also a casualty in the altered cultural climate. Trilling's prestige made him an inviting target. Objections from younger intellectuals to his cultural politics reached a new pitch of fervor with Trilling's fourth essay collection, *Beyond Culture* (1965), in which Trilling affirmed "the tone of the center," maintaining that one must accept that biology lies "beyond culture" and that the late Freud was a conservative yet also a liberating figure.

During the fourth phase of Trilling's critical reputation (1965-1975), many senior critics honored him as an elder literary statesman, even as some

younger American reviewers dismissed him as a dusty intellectual monument. For the latter, Trilling had become an Establishment icon suffering from "advanced respectability," that figure whom Harold Rosenberg had once mocked as "an Eliotic [read: 'sclerotic'] Cleric of Culture." His most noteworthy work of these years was *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972), a revision of his Charles Eliot Norton lectures delivered at Harvard in 1970; and a slight book, *Mind in the Modern World* (1972), a lecture delivered upon receiving of the Thomas Jefferson Award in the Humanities.

Sincerity and Authenticity and *Mind in the Modern World* were reviewed together respectfully on the front page of the *New York Times Book Review*. But many younger American critics sympathetic to the counterculture and to the New Left greeted his work with condescension and even contempt, even though there were occasional exceptions, such as Gerald Graff and Richard Ohmann. Older reviewers, however, even formerly severe critics, discovered amid the cultural swing to the Left something new to admire in Trilling's moderation and Arnoldian sensibility. England's John Holloway spoke for them when he said in *Encounter* that "in our literary-academic world Trilling has to be called a heroic figure: almost the only one."

The encomia to Trilling as a culture hero, at least among American literary intellectuals and academics, have become increasingly lavish since his death, as witnessed in the polemical Right-Left battles for his mantle and the scholarly reassessments of his career. In this fifth, posthumous stage of his reputation (1975-), neoconservatives and Left-liberals have engaged in surreptitious grave-robbing of Trilling, even as most radicals and academic literary theorists have con-

tinued to disown him. Because Trilling often seemed to be an unpolitical literary man, perched far above all internecine squabbling, and because he died just before the ideological lines demarcating neoconservative, liberal, and radical positions shifted and were redrawn in the mid-1970s, his name has been used and abused by all sides since his death.

Neoconservatives have proclaimed Trilling a foe of the Left, an opponent of the adversary culture, and a conservative defender of humanist values and cultural literacy; in his intellectual memoir, William Barrett explicitly nominated Trilling as a forerunner of neoconservatism of the 1970s and 1980s. Left-liberals have emphasized Trilling's high critical standards and his Arnoldian aspiration to reinvigorate liberalism, not abandon it. Academic radicals such as Cornel West have scorned Trilling as the "godfather" of neoconservatism, whose work leads to "an intellectual dead end." Still other Left critics have paid respect to Trilling, acknowledging that he was a conservator, though not a conservative: a keeper of the literary heritage whose subtle analyses challenged liberals and radicals to acknowledge their own conserving impulses, even as he licensed an attachment to a more chastened, self-conscious liberalism.

Meanwhile, scholars, biographical critics, and memoirists have credited Trilling with exhibiting an exemplary way of pursuing the humanist vocation in the contemporary academy. Formerly out of favor, his critical humanism has, once again, gained a broad following. In the 1970s and early 1980s, Trilling's affirmation of the shaped or unified self seemed naïve and unrigorous; post-structuralism, with its conception of fragmented, decentered selves, held sway. But Trilling's cultural criticism became once again attractive in the late 1980s, as many literary academics

recoiled from Marxist and post-structuralist theoreticism. In the 1990s they have also turned to Trilling's humanism and rationalism, citing his reservations about the social alienation and political irresponsibility of the great modernist writers and his dismissal of the counterculture of the 1960s ("modernism in the streets," in Trilling's widely quoted phrase) as applicable to current campus debates, especially against the perceived irrationalist excesses of American postmodernism and multiculturalism.

Finally, with the long-awaited publication of Diana Trilling's revelatory memoir of the couple's years together up to 1950, *The Beginning of the Journey: The Marriage of Diana and Lionel Trilling* (1993), still another revaluation of Trilling's work and achievement is to be expected soon, one that will doubtless address the relationship between his personal life and his intellectual legacy. Sharing her version of the "private" Lionel with the reader, Diana Trilling argues persuasively that the man himself was very different from the man in the writings—and that Trilling's tense, and sometimes anguished, even tortured private life was sharply at odds with his decorous public face.

III

"You have no position," Richard Sennett once upbraided Trilling in a conversation. "You are always in between." "Between," responded Trilling, "is the only honest place to be."

However necessary the contention, there indeed Trilling rests. Neither his adamantly intermediate position nor even such a characterization of his critical practice has appealed to all readers. But his contested reception across the ideological spectrum does make clear that he remains in death, as he had been in life, "always in

between.” And so long as this perception of a Trilling betwixt and between all sides endures, the dualities of his work and life will continue to fascinate his readers—and provoke numerous claims and counterclaims to his legacy. Two decades after his death, critics remain intrigued by the intricate dialectic of the literary

and private personality of Lionel Trilling, still an elusive presence lurking at and yet hovering above “the bloody cross-roads” of New York literary politics and American intellectual life, ever a quietly controversial figure in all his radiantly opposing selves.

White Crocus

*Pushing up through the detritus of winter
brave fragile solitary indomitable
a white crocus.
You may trample it
desiccate it
eradicate all trace of it
next spring it will arise and bloom again.*

*I have known a person like that
fragile and indomitable
against disease disaster despair death.
I see an immense figure
its feet rooted deep in the earth
its hands pushing against the stars.*

*Michaelangelo would have painted it
Blake would have drawn it
invoking eternity
in a white crocus
absolute.*

—Louise Dauner