

# Nine Glimpses of Our Selves

*'The Opposing Self,'* by Lionel Trilling (Viking Press, 323 pp. \$3.50), examines the work of more than half a dozen nineteenth-century writers and compares them with those of the twentieth century to discover the nature of the modern self. Professor Howard Mumford Jones of Harvard University, who reviews it here, is the author of *"Ideas in America"* and *"Education and World Tragedy."*

By Howard Mumford Jones

SINCE the year is young, it is no compliment to Lionel Trilling's *The Opposing Self* to call it the leading critical volume of 1955, but I can express my belief in its merit if I say that next December, when all the accounts are in, it is bound to be one of the significant volumes of 1955. Yet, before discussing its quality I wish to establish its context.

The term "academic" is commonly reproach these days. The popular reviewer complains that the professor writes like a pedant, or congratulates the author on omitting documentation, or says that in diction, style, or structure a particular work is high-brow. That the popular book he praises is usually parasitical—that is, lives only by sucking life out of more authoritative studies—is something he vaguely knows, but for him all books improve in proportion as they can



—Bettmann Archive.

Howells—"... the smiling aspects of life."

be rewritten for *The Reader's Digest*. This opinion is often shared by the general publisher: "Yes, yes, excellent, no doubt, but where's the market for it?" (The market meanwhile is steadily supporting Penguin books, Vintage books, Anchor books, Modern Library books, and other egghead volumes.)

When we want serious discussion we must therefore turn, as in the case of Professor Trilling, to the colleges. In an era when the popular reviewer applauds the topical, "English" classes are full up and running over, every college has one or more writers in residence, poets and poetry are principally supported by the academic world, and with few notable exceptions vital criticism comes from the universities, not from magazines and not from newspapers. We do not support an American parallel to the European *feuilleton*. The popular reviewer (again with exceptions) exhibits no interest in literature, but only in immediacy. His preoccupation is not with established art, but with new books. If he knows anything about literary history he conceals it. His concern is with the latest fiction, the most recent report, the youngest sensational confession. He resembles the Greeks in being eager after each new thing. But it is the only respect in which he resembles the Greeks.

Mr. Trilling's nine essays in *"The Opposing Self"* are in the European tradition. This tradition holds that the love of books is not synonymous with bookishness, that the love of literature increases, not diminishes, the love of life, and that the greatness of a literary work rests ultimately in moral greatness, in that criticism of life which some moderns misinterpret as criticism by death, since life for them is merely that which disappoints the soul. His topics are nineteenth-century topics—the rabbinical overtones of Wordsworth's quietism, Keats's heroic vision of the tragic life, and the "spiritual and moral health" from which it flowed, the modern reader's impatience with Howells's attention to the "smiling aspects of life," the identity of life and art in Tolstoy, Flaubert's testamentary purpose in *"Bouvard and Pechuchet,"* as well as considerations of Jane Austen, Henry James, Dickens, and, not ignobly closing the file, George Orwell. These writers are unfashionable in the



**THE AUTHOR:** At forty-nine, with a semester's leave from Columbia University just beginning, Lionel Trilling has decided the time has come to clear up a terrible case of mistaken identity. For years Trilling has been identified as a literary critic of brilliant and constructive dimensions, taking on Dr. Kinsey as easily as Huck Finn, or vice versa. Only once, in 1947, did he interrupt his streak of essays in criticism to publish *"The Middle of the Journey,"* his first and only novel. Still, Trilling would be a lot happier with a novelist's identity than with a critic's, an ambition he enthusiastically debated with himself the other day. "I think we have to let it stand that I am a critic, but it was kind of an accident," he began. "I'm pleased with it, but it wasn't anything I undertook from youth on. In 1939 I did a critical dissertation on Matthew Arnold, and I found it was a good deal easier to write criticism than fiction. But in criticism I always felt I was doing a job," he continued, by now referring to Lionel Trilling, critic, in the past tense. "One essay led to another, but it was never actually a program—like writing fiction. From now on I plan to give a good deal of time to that. I'm writing a second novel at the moment." Once, a decade ago, Trilling said gleefully of the criticism business: "The idea of being paid for reading a book one wants to read fills the occasional reviewer with the sense of innocently cheating the world. Especially is this true if the book is too expensive to be bought without guilt. My acquisitive instincts account for many of my reviews." Over the years he has reviewed such differently priced books as *"The George Eliot Letters"* (\$20) and *"Pipe Night,"* by John O'Hara (a measly \$2.50). Trilling, born in New York, graduated from Columbia in '25, taught English at Wisconsin and Hunter for a few years, then returned to his alma mater in '31 as a faculty member. He lives in Morningside Heights, close to Columbia's campus. On a clear day he can see his students, critics, and novelists unflinchingly mingled, trooping off to class.

—BERNARD KALB.

world of journalism, but they are fashionable where the younger generation, eagerly frequenting classrooms, finds a stimulus in them the popular reviewer does not offer. The paradox is that the academic Mr. Trilling is vital, whereas the popular reviewer is spiritually dead, or at least, if he disappeared tomorrow, it would not affect the life of the soul.

**T**HE essays collected here all appeared elsewhere as articles, introductions to new editions, and lectures, and they are all separate entities, but they are bound together by a central theme. This is that the literature of the last century struggled more successfully than we do to define the nature of the self in both its esthetic and its moral aspects, that the acceptance of self-limitation can be a matter of joy and not of disappointment, and that, partly as cause, partly as consequence, a prison-image haunts that literature. The Ur-Bild of that dungeon is the Bastille, but

men began to recognize the existence of prisons that were not built of stone, nor even of social restrictions and economic disabilities. They learned to see that they might be immured not only by the overt force of society, but by a coercion in some ways more frightful because it involved their own acquiescence . . . for it had established its prisons in the family life, in the professions, in the image of respectability, in the ideas of faith and duty, in (so the poets said) the language itself.

The modern self, developed out of the "intense and adversary imagination" of the nineteenth century, has also developed "certain powers of indignant perception," which are all well enough, but it has confused culture

with society, it has mistaken the limitations of society for the limitations of life, and it is afraid both of joy and of beauty. With some inconsistencies Mr. Trilling shows the nineteenth-century writer building affirmatively upon the limitations both of life and of literature, and the twentieth-century writer misunderstanding the aim and triumph of his predecessors.

I cannot agree altogether with Professor Trilling that the nineteenth century first brought into life and literature the new category of quality, nor attribute to Hegel quite the importance he here receives in fusing moral and esthetic judgments. I might murmur something about the split personality of the Renaissance, or mutter great names like those of Shakespeare, Castiglione, Marlowe, Machiavelli, and Marsilio Ficino. I think his equation of Dickens with Dante, and Little Dorrit with Beatrice of the "Divine Comedy," amusingly absurd. His essay on Wordsworth is verbose and his discussion of Keats lacks center. But these are personal and minor matters. What really counts is that Professor Trilling has dared to utter unfashionable terms like duty, joy, the surprise and elevation of poetry, the spirit of man, and culture. He is acute as a modern and he is acute as a scholar. In the essay on Tolstoy he writes:

. . . it may happen that our preoccupation with evil will lead us to lose our knowledge, or at least the literary confirmation of our knowledge, of what goodness of life is. The literary production since Tolstoy has been enormously brilliant and enormously relevant, yet it is a striking fact that, although many writers have been able to tell us of the pain of life, virtually no writer has been able to tell us of pain in terms of life's possible joy . . . the characteristic criticism of our time is the psychological analysis of language. This is a technique of great usefulness, but there are moments in literature which do not yield the secret of their power to any study of language, because the power does not depend on language but on the moral imagination.

"The moral imagination!" The moral imagination is not the imagination of violence or of nescience, not that strange, macabre imagination the popular reviewer mistakes for strength and the avant-garde writer endorses as a kind of literary depth psychology; it is the imagination that gives us "Anna Karenina," "Mansfield Park," the letters of Keats, and the dramatic strength of Dickens, literally work on which Mr. Trilling has mature and philosophic things to say.

## Siecle's Debacle

*"The Follies and Friendships of Oscar Wilde," by Lewis Broad (Thomas Y. Crowell. 302 pp. \$5), retells the tragic career of the gifted playwright and epigrammist. Here it is reviewed by Joseph Wood Krutch, whose book of essays called "The Measure of Man" won the 1954 National Book Award for non-fiction.*

By Joseph Wood Krutch

**T**HE STORY of Oscar Wilde is too dramatic not to be told a good many times. It has been; it will be; and here, in Lewis Broad's "The Follies and Friendships of Oscar Wilde," it is again, attractively packaged for the post-centennial year.

New facts are scarce: a little additional light was shed some months ago by Vyvyan Holland's "The Son of Oscar Wilde" [SR, Sept. 16, 1954]. On the other hand, there was less in the full text of "De Profundis," first published a few years ago, than the just-removed restrictions put upon it seemed to promise. Survivors from Wilde's day grow fewer and it does not seem likely that much more will ever be known. In fact, there is probably not much of the definitely knowable which is not known. The dates and the public acts are established. A large body of reminiscences, recollections, and remembered conversations has been published. The secret springs of conduct are still obscure but they always will be.

Mr. Broad seems to have familiarized himself pretty thoroughly with the available evidence and to be determined to be as balanced and as fair as possible. Within the limits which information and a balanced view impose his first aim appears to have been to be as interesting as possible. He begins his story at the moment when Wilde, at the height of his success was also on the very brink of destruction. He then goes back to sketch briefly but not inadequately the outline of his hero's previous career. But he soon returns to the climactic months and builds the whole structure of his narrative around the debacle.

The disadvantage of this method is, of course, that the treatment of the earlier years is somewhat sketchy and that not much new can be said about Wilde as a literary artist whose brilliance and flamboyant weakness are both, nevertheless, recognized. The advantage is both dramatic interest and the fact that this treatment focuses sharply two of the most inter-

## A Measure of Reason

By Elizabeth Bartlett

**I**F I could hold a moment  
A moment in my hand  
I would understand  
Why time must pass

If I could make a moment  
To human shape and size  
I would not despise  
Death's hourglass

If I could live a moment  
And keep it perfect, whole  
I would need no soul  
To lift this clod

If I could be a moment  
And like a moment clasp  
The world within my grasp  
I would be God