

Left in Place

Diana and Lionel Trilling, New York's most important intellectual couple, confronted what was wrong with liberalism but never wandered from the faith

BY MATTHEW COOPER

The Beginning of the Journey: The Marriage of Lionel and Diana Trilling
Diana Trilling, *Harcourt Brace & Co.*, \$24.95

If you don't know the work of the Trillings, you should—especially if you are a reader of this magazine. *The Washington Monthly's* founder and editor, Charles Peters, often cites Franklin Roosevelt and John Kennedy as his political heroes; Christ and Cervantes get an occasional plug, too. But among the forebearers of Peters' critique of liberalism, Lionel Trilling stands out as a key figure—and not just because he taught Peters at Columbia. Trilling's 1950 collection of essays, *The Liberal Imagination*, presaged much of what the *Monthly* would advocate at its birth 19 years later. Trilling argued that liberalism, though born of laudable motives, often becomes rigid and ossified.

Of the two Trillings, Lionel is by far the better known—or at least he was until his death in 1975. From his perch at Columbia, he wrote for more than 40 years on literature, society, politics, and culture in a way that's rare today when contemporary literary criticism, concerned as it is with semiotics, deconstruction and other linguistic methodologies, self-consciously distances itself from the world outside the academy. In journals like *The Nation* and *Partisan Review*, Diana wrote similar sorts of essays and reviews. It's hard to think of contemporary literary critics who do such work now. Ironically, a couple of parallels to the Trillings that come to mind are Edward Said, also a Columbia English professor, who is a strident

cheerleader for Palestinian nationalism, and his polar opposite, Norman Podhoretz, the neoconservative editor of *Commentary* and a former student of Trilling's, who is a strident champion of Reagan and the Likud. The Trillings shared the Said-Podhoretz connection with the real world. The slightly pretentious but useful French term is *engagé*.

But any parallels end there. Both Li and Di, as close friends called them, rejected what she calls "ritualistic politics." In the thirties, forties, and fifties, liberals disillusioned with Soviet totalitarianism went one of two ways. On the one hand, they took Whittaker Chambers' path, turning sharply right. Or, like the Trillings, they rejected Communism yet remained true to the great liberal goal of fair play. (The *Monthly* would eventually apply this same principle of questioning liberal orthodoxies in asking what had gone wrong with the American union movement, with public schools, and with government itself while maintaining a faith that these institutions could work.)

On the great issues of their lives the Trillings walked a delicate middle course. They opposed Communism but also opposed Joseph McCarthy. In the 1960s, the campus left vilified Lionel. During the Columbia riots of 1968, radicals decried his anti-Communism and put up posters bearing his picture with the inscription: WANTED, DEAD OR ALIVE, FOR CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY. Even in the face of such madness, however, the Trillings were never moved to react by abandoning liberalism altogether. Neither became a

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neoconservative. Three years before Lionel's death, both Trillings resisted the entreaties of Irving Kristol, the neoconservative editor of *The Public Interest*, and his wife, the historian Gertrude Himmelfarb, to sign a petition supporting Richard Nixon's reelection, even though both Trillings were uncomfortable with McGovern's brand of liberalism. "Lionel did not live long enough to witness the rise of the neoconservative movement," Diana writes, "but I have little question that if he had been alive and working in the eighties, he would have been highly critical of this swing to the right by our old friends."

Diana Trilling's memoir chronicles their intellectual journey from thirties' radicalism to a more searching, skeptical liberalism. Since her book was released earlier this fall, it has received wide praise, including thoughtful and flattering reviews in *The New Republic* and *The Atlantic Monthly*, but most have failed to emphasize that this is a fun book. Although the Trillings' literary criticism can be a bit daunting for those who haven't kept up with their *Cousine Betties* or their *Princess Casamassimas*, this memoir is delightfully approachable for the rest of us. Think of it as an account of what it was like to be a thinking person during the first half of this century. (The book pretty much leaves off around 1950.) Its style is conversational, perhaps owing to the fact that Diana Trilling, now approaching 90, is virtually blind and "wrote" the book by dictating it in her New York apartment.

One of the remarkable things about the memoir is how it reminds us how much our culture has changed in a relatively short time. I haven't read much about what it was like to drink in the twenties. Here I learn that Lionel and Diana met at a speakeasy in 1927 which, far from being a Capone-style saloon, was more like a family trattoria. And the two were not untypical of a time when liquor flowed more freely than it does today. Diana writes: "Until Lionel and I decided to marry we were never wholly sober in each other's com-

pany. . . I doubt that I left any social gathering without being more than a little drunk." And there are observations on what it was like to deal with the antisemitism that excluded Jews from any number of elite professions. English departments were particularly disdainful of Jews because they were not thought to be sufficiently refined. (Lionel

Trilling was the first Jew to become a tenured professor in Columbia's English department.) For her part, Diana was denied even an interview for a post at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. And of course the transformation of women's roles is equally extraordinary. For example, it's not surprising to hear that Diana was expected to do the housework even though Lionel was well ahead of his time in being supportive of her writing; this burden still falls to many if not most women in today's two-career marriages. But what is amazing was that as late as 1967, when Diana found herself at a dinner



Diana Trilling today

in Germany with such intellectual luminaries as Daniel Patrick Moynihan, no one suggested that Diana join the men after their German host enjoined his male guests to move into the parlor to discuss politics.

There are scores of other interesting insights—how, for instance, the kind of intellectuals who became *engagé* in the thirties spent the twenties "deliberately distanc[ing] themselves from public affairs; their refusal to talk or think about politics was how they guaranteed their intellectual purity. I was not surprised when J. Robert Oppenheimer, testifying at his loyalty hearing before the Atomic Energy Commission in 1954, declared that in the late twenties and early thirties he had no radio and read no newspaper." And although we tend to think of the Depression as a sudden calamity that befell the entire nation, Trilling reminds us that its effects were more gradual: "Throughout the winter of 1929 and the spring of 1930, the life of the city was much as it had always been. Restaurants continued to be patronized, theaters and concerts were as well-attended as ever. In our own circle the collapse of the mar-

Tom Victor

ket and the possible consequences were scarcely spoken of—it was as if, in a more recent time, the Berlin Wall came down without any of us stopping to comment on it.”

But it would be wrong to think of *The Beginning of the Journey* as merely the story of an era. It is as personal as it is political, and much of that story is sad. This comes as a surprise. Those who were familiar with the Trillings couldn't help but be impressed by them. If Dashiell Hammett and Lillian Hellman were in some sense frauds—a dashing couple with unsavory Stalinist politics—then Li and Di were truly admirable. Not only politically sensible and smart, they were gracious and refined. (There's much in this book about Lionel's exquisite manners.) But like many memoirs, this one reveals melancholy behind the public facade. Both Trillings had parents who could only be called neurotic. Of Lionel's father, for instance, Diana writes: “By the time I met Lionel's father, his hypochondria was so extreme that he would not have gone within splashing distance of cold water. He had five, or was it six, weights of underwear with which to move from season to season without ‘shock to the system.’” As a boy Lionel bore the expectations of parents who expected him to become an Oxford-educated literary critic. Kids raised this way tend to get beaten up a lot. There's a sad but unintentionally funny account of a bookish young Lionel enduring an onslaught of snowballs by thinking of Norse myths.

As adults Lionel and Diana were themselves neurotic. Lionel was prone to depression and writer's block. In his later years he was editing a literary anthology and “day after day, week after miserable week, he labored at this one assignment: Often the most he could accomplish in a day was to change a colon to a semicolon or a ‘but’ to a ‘however.’” More ominously, Lionel was given to occasional outbursts of enormous anger—nothing physically violent, but during which he would blame Diana for all that was wrong in his life. For her part, Diana was a walking catalogue of phobias and ailments. She was especially prone to panic attacks. For years she sought comfort from an array of psychoanalysts—both Trillings were deep admirers of Freud—whose treatments were utterly ineffective.

The qualities that made Lionel Trilling such a profound thinker—his grace and moderation—were, he understood, his undoing as a writer of fiction. More than he wanted to be a great critic, Lionel strove to

be a great novelist. And while he achieved no small fame with a handful of stories and a novel, his work was, he recognized, a decidedly bloodless product. His novel *The Middle of the Journey* is based on the Alger Hiss spy affair, and while undeniably subtle and intelligent, the book comes off as cool and detached. Trilling himself understood that he was too emotionally constrained to write a passionate novel. He saw his life, Diana writes, as

a disjunction. . . between the circumspect life of criticism and the life of unhampered instinct, of drunkenness, irresponsibility, unimpeded sexual freedom, from which flowed (as Lionel would have it) the capacity to be a novelist. I could not have wished Lionel to be a drunkard in order to be a novelist. The power to write fiction does not lie in the bottle. But I could have wished him to have a thousand mistresses were this to have released him from the constraints upon him as a writer of fiction.

Given that both Trillings lived their lives with considerable sorrow and repression, it is surprising and unfortunate that Diana doesn't have kinder words for the Beat poets of the 1950s. Allen Ginsberg was a student of Trilling's at Columbia in the 1940s. Over a period of years Ginsberg popped in and out of the Trillings' lives. To be sure, Ginsberg's eccentricities could be infuriating. He once showed up at the Trillings' house and unceasingly played an accordion-like instrument all night. And Ginsberg's devotion to psychedelic drugs was wrong. Still, the Beats had a lesson for the Trillings that Diana seems to note only grudgingly. Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac were the public embodiment of what, in a way, the repressed Trillings—and in some way, much of the nation—privately yearned for in the years after World War II. During the 1950s, while America was embracing the gray flannel suit, Ginsberg and Kerouac were consciously rebelling against the careerism of their contemporaries and trying to strip away the masks that hide us from others and from ourselves. The Beats often went too far. But they also had important lessons about simply loosening up that Li and Di, in all their wisdom, would have been wiser still to have embraced. □

Political Booknotes

The Case Against the General: Manuel Noriega and the Politics of American Justice

Steve Albert

Charles Scribner's Sons, \$25

By Michael Isikoff

During his 1988 trial in Tampa, Florida, Medellin cartel baron Carlos Lehder was portrayed by federal prosecutors as the most monstrous drug trafficker of recent times—a deranged, Hitler-loving thug who turned cocaine smuggling into a multi-billion dollar hemispheric enterprise. By the fall of 1991, Lehder appeared to have undergone a remarkably quick rehabilitation. He was now a certified U.S. Department of Justice truth teller, one of the star witnesses in the government's case against the new demon of the moment, Manuel Antonio Noriega.

Never mind that Lehder had never actually met Noriega, or that his track record for veracity was less than sterling. His character transformation is only one of the many bizarre subplots in the U.S. government's four-year effort to convict the one-time dictator of Panama—a story that is told in exhaustive and at times fascinating detail in Steve Albert's *The Case Against the General*. Indicted in the winter of 1988, during the peak of drug war hysteria, Noriega had been publicly portrayed as a "drug lord" and poisoner of American children. In December 1989, determined to show his resolve against the cocaine threat, President Bush unleashed Operation

Just Cause—an invasion of Panama by 23,000 U.S. troops whose primary goal was to capture Noriega and haul him into a U.S. courtroom.

But while Noriega was unquestionably brutal and corrupt—character defects well known to the CIA officials who had long kept him on their payroll—his actual role in the cocaine trade had been grossly overblown. One charge in the 1988 indictment—that Noriega had taken a \$4 million cash bribe from a Colombian drug smuggler named Boris Orlate—lacked even the slightest corroboration. (It later turned out to have been concocted by Orlate after he was imprisoned and facing a lengthy prison term.) Another part of the indictment—a tangled story of Noriega seeking Fidel Castro's help in mediating a dispute with the cartel—was thrown in largely for political reasons in Miami and was doubted even by

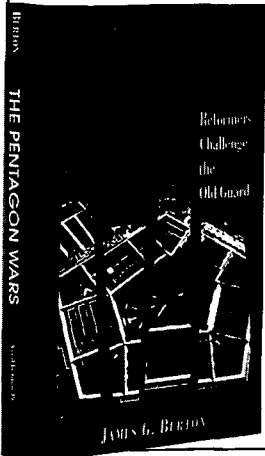
some of the indictment's authors. Indeed, one of the more startling passages in Albert's book recounts the first serious review of the case by professional prosecutors in Miami shortly after Noriega was brought into U.S. custody. Assigned to head the Justice Department's prosecution team, senior litigation counsel Michael P. Sullivan thought the testimony so weak that Noriega could get off. "It was a loser, he

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