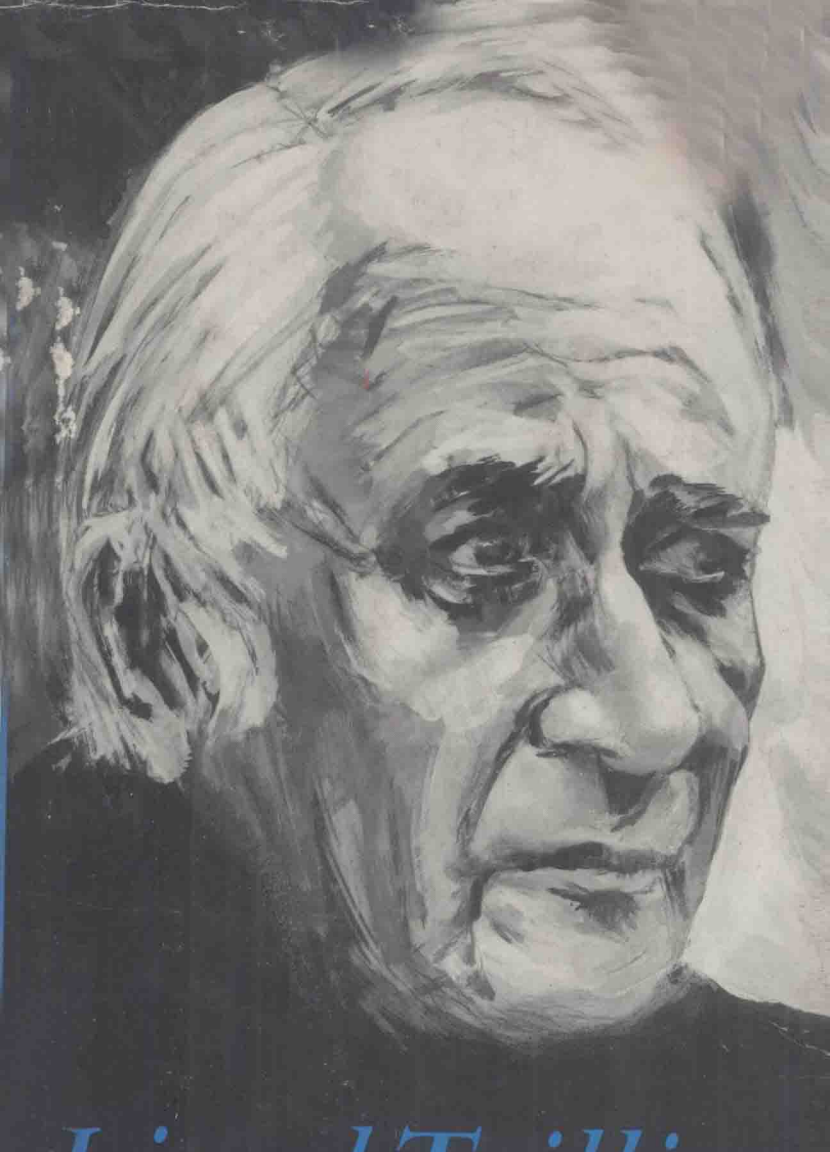

Lionel Trilling

MIND AND CHARACTER

Edward Joseph Shoben, Jr.

LIONEL TRILLING

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(continued on last page of book)

For Ann
who made it possible
and
To Abigail
in loving hope for her future

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errors or stupidities. Both, despite grim efforts to avoid or to eliminate them, may appear.

One final word: I have dedicated this essay to my wife and to my granddaughter. The inscription to the former has a bald literalness that masks private and rich complexities and intensities that I pray she fully understands. The inscription to the latter, who was born while this little work was in progress, grows out of the unexpected hopes and loving yearnings that new grandfatherhood quickens. I shall be particularly proud if this book of mine provides a bridge by which Abigail may one day cross the years to become acquainted with Lionel Trilling's mind and character.

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Preface

When a clinical psychologist writes a book about a literary critic, some explanation obviously is in order. In the present case, the necessary explanation entails three statements that I am delighted to put on the public record.

In the first place, I have been bewildered and troubled for years by the great gulf that yawns between psychology and serious reflections on literature, between the social sciences and the humanities. Both concern themselves with human functioning and with the qualities of human experience; both aim at increasing our understanding of ourselves and our relationships to others and to the realities of culture, and both reflect the uses of the mind and the imagination in our efforts to achieve that always deficient comprehension of our status and our conduct as human beings. Lionel Trilling stands out as a literary figure who, if he did not bridge that chasm in the enterprise of thought, certainly narrowed it. Committed to Freud, skeptical but sympathetically informed about Marx, and intimately familiar with the contemporary efforts of such social scientists as David Riesman and Daniel Bell, he insisted that the self defines the central subject matter of literature, and that the conflict between the self, ever seeking a greater degree of autonomy and free expression, and the culture, at once nurturant and nay-saying, lies at the heart of the human drama. As one whose professional des-

tiny it is to hold frequently the damp hand of other people's misfortune, I agree. In the unshared reflections in which I occasionally indulge in my consulting room, I often am terrified by the perception of how fragile is the skin of civilization that covers the idiosyncratic and self-serving drives, impulses, and passions of my patients. Just as frequently, I find both my compassion and my rage aroused by the ways in which the influences of society have cruelly cabined the spontaneity, the emotional capabilities, and the imaginations of the people with whom I work.

What may seem odd is that a great deal of the understanding I may possess of these poignant matters derives as much from the literary record of human destiny as from my own discipline of psychology. This state of affairs may issue from nothing more than the fact that my personal intellectual awakening, if it ever occurred, took place during my undergraduate years under the auspices of some stimulating teachers of literature. I am more inclined to believe, however, that writers like Shakespeare and Melville understood more of the vicissitudes of the human heart, more of the subterranean forces that color our experience for good or ill, than most (which is *not* a synonym for "all") psychologists. The superiority of outstanding literary insight stems, I think, from the capacity of the disciplined and informed imagination to perceive experience in its essence and as a totality, a whole, whereas psychologists typically content themselves with more precise but fractional forms of comprehension, eschewing great leaps of the imaginative reason in favor of an inchworm's units of progress, in the faith that these small increments will profitably cumulate. Both procedures strike me as essential. What I regret is that they so seldom enter into an enriching dialogue with one another.

In the mind of Lionel Trilling, something, at least, of that dialogue went on for half a century. In his es-

says and books, the extensions of a remarkable mind, that dialogue becomes available to any who can read. As a participant in that interchange, I have learned much that puts me in Trilling's debt. In a very real sense, this effort of mine represents an acknowledgment of that debt and a desire to share with others my considerable benefits as Trilling's debtor.

Second, a clinician cannot escape the great puzzles: about the meaning of that dream of happiness human beings are heir to; about how life's contradictions can be managed with a measure of contentment and its buffets sustained without breaking the spirit; about the sources of enjoyment and pride we can find even in the face of our own mortality and our own curious and damaging self-destructive and socially disruptive tendencies. Neither could Trilling. His concern for the complexities of personal experience and for the quality of life as people encounter it on a day-to-day basis underlay all his reflections on the authors, works, and issues to which he turned his attention. That concern, always immediate and warm, coupled with the creativity with which he mined the literary veins available to him, make him, for me, a model and an exemplar in the twentieth century of the tradition that deserves to be called humanistic. In addition to the fertility and provocative power of his mind, Trilling exhibits in his published work a *character*—a set of reflected-upon values in action—that, I confess, I envy to a degree and that I admire enormously. The world, I believe, would be a more engaging place if it were populated by a few more Lionel Trillings.

Finally, I spent the years from 1950 to 1965 as a faculty member at Columbia University. Trilling, thirteen years my senior, had already achieved the acclaim due him for the work culminating in *The Liberal Imagination* when I arrived on Morningside Heights, still a bit callow, a trifle brash, and marked by levels of ignorance that time has done too little, I'm afraid, to

reduce. Although I never knew him well, Trilling was extraordinarily generous and sweetly responsive to me, and his friendliness and occasional gentle guidance meant a good deal to me personally and to my intellectual development. I've rarely enjoyed such comfortably stimulating talk as at our infrequent lunches together at the Faculty Club or during occasional gentle discussions in his office or mine. Neither a full-fledged friend nor a disciple (Trilling wanted no disciples), I found my affections almost as much invoked as my respect for his personal qualities and my esteem for his intellectual powers. If (as I hope is the case) my admiration shows in the pages that follow, I make no apologies and simply quote Trilling himself: "objectivity . . . begins with what might be called a programmatic prejudice in favor of the work or author being studied." The point is that, once again, Trilling's character figures as largely in his work as does his mind, and both his mind and his character have something of worth to say to our much-chivied civilization.

1

Lionel Trilling: The Opposing Self

White-haired, his deep-set eyes characteristically haunted, Lionel Trilling roamed the front of his Columbia College classroom. The magisterial reputation as literary and social critic that he brought with him evoked an atmosphere of formality. Yet, without attempting to deny it and with an all but articulate and quietly insistent pleasure in decorum, he colored the climate of formality with a relaxed ease. Appearing (but only appearing) to turn randomly through the pages of James Joyce's *Dubliners*, he read aloud in a softly modulated baritone: "He lived at a little distance from his body." The always evanescent smile warmed the haunted eyes, and there was a sudden joyous glow that every undergraduate in the class felt, whether or not he understood it in some more intellectual sense. "Marvelous phrase," Trilling exclaimed. "Isn't that the essence of alienation?" He then commented, still moving in his leisurely fashion about the room, on an association between the habit of one of the characters in *Dubliners* of keeping a rotting apple in his desk and Friedrich Schiller's statement that he could only write poetry if a rotting apple were emitting its fragrance from his tabletop. And that led to a typical, good-humored but thoroughly serious warning against preciousness and too academic an approach to literature. "If anyone connects any of these rotting apples to the

Fall," Trilling grinned, "he immediately loses twenty points on the next exam."

Representative as it is, this commonplace vignette catches many of the central qualities of Trilling as a human being—his courtly combining of formality and relaxation, the mystery of the hag-ridden eyes, and the ready smile that always failed to realize itself fully. The story reflects his love of fun that clearly exceeded an intellectual's taste for sheer wit, and it at least suggests the delight he found in seriousness without solemnity. It hints at his sense of the richness and crucial value of linkages between the experience of literature and the experience of life. It vibrates with his refusal to burden works of art with imposed symbols, to force them onto procrustean beds of aesthetic or literary theory, as against investing the effort to see each of them as, in the phrase of Matthew Arnold's that he so prized, "an object as in itself it really is."

If *mind* was and remains the dominant motif in Trilling as teacher and as writer, what accounts for his influence and his importance is the intimacy with which mind married passion. When he wrote of E. M. Forster's "two ideals" of truth and passion, the first symbolized by "some vaguely ancient pagan time" in Greece, and the second by the "ruffianism of the Renaissance" in Italy,[1] he spoke in significant part from self-knowledge and a felt commonality. In quoting Forster's "those ghosts who are still clothed with passion or thought are profitable companions," he reveals something vital and distinctive in himself.

Such self-revelation didn't happen often. Trilling was a deeply private person. His use of "I" in his essays is far more an acknowledgment of responsibility for the ideas and judgments he advances than it is a means of self-disclosure, and, in his relationships, he was at once highly available but essentially inaccessible. Most people who knew him only casually or only in his roles as professor, colleague, or co-participant in a professional

conference, were quite aware that to talk with him was to command his full attention, that to ask his help was to receive it. Few, however—probably no more than his wife Diana and perhaps such rare and old friends as Jacques Barzun and James Grossman—caught more than glimpses of an intense inner life. Nevertheless, one cannot read him, just as one could not know him at any distance, without realizing that Trilling's feelings surged powerfully within him and that he was a man who cared profoundly about people, values, and ideas.

Indeed, his capacity for enjoyment was basically a function of his large capacity for feeling and for caring. While he was too much a born-and-bred New Yorker to qualify as an outdoorsman or to respond to nature after the manner of the Wordsworth he so deeply admired, he liked to wade a trout stream, and he appreciated the skills that a fly rod requires. Although without the cultivation of a true gourmet, he enjoyed a variety of foods and wines. Cordially and genuinely interested in a remarkably wide range of people, his fascination with personalities quite different from his own and with their distinctive ways of fraternizing was only partly professional. A reflection of his preoccupation with manners, with what he called the "hum and buzz of implication" that informally but fundamentally "draw the members of a culture together," it also emerged from his committed concern for human "variousness and possibility."[2]

For closely related reasons, he sometimes found an uncomplicated and joyful pleasure in mindless movies, and his fondness for what he regarded as second-rate literature seemed based in a contented suspension of his critical faculties and a resultant freedom, almost a license, to toy with ideas and forms that levied little on his seriousness. Laughter, including his own, so long as it was without derision, was important to him. It occurred often and sometimes memorably. During the course that Trilling taught jointly with Barzun in cultural history, a student once mentioned,