

Edited by John Rodden

Lionel Trilling and the Critics

Opposing Selves

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Foreword by Morris Dickstein

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Foreword

A Man Nobody Knew:

Lionel Trilling Remembered

Morris Dickstein

In recent years the climate of opinion surrounding a writer has come in for almost as much attention as the work itself; indeed, for some who see the meaning of literary texts as prismatic and unstable, this shifting spectrum *is* the work itself, the sum of how it has been perceived, assimilated, and reimagined. Since the 1960s, collections of articles devoted to individual writers have multiplied as teaching and research tools but their purpose has changed. Once focused on close reading, they now reflect the historical interests of teachers and scholars. Books like this show us how a writer's reputation evolved but also serve as lessons in the time-bound nature of interpretation, documenting how received ideas, cultural assumptions, and subjective preferences color our understanding of all we read. *Lionel Trilling and the Critics: Opposing Selves*, edited by John Rodden, is almost unique because its subject is not a poet or novelist but a critic, Lionel Trilling, who only occasionally tried his hand at imaginative writing. Neither Edmund Wilson, whom Trilling warmly admired, nor F. R. Leavis, with whom he shared many literary assumptions, has as yet been the subject of such a historical record, though Wilson's work was more wide ranging and Leavis's more controversial than Trilling's.

One reason is that Wilson, with the famous transparency of his writing, and even Leavis, with his far knottier, more Jamesian manner, always made clear exactly what they wanted to say. Trilling, on the other hand, despite the uncommon grace and felicity of his style, was often seen as elusive, even enigmatic, and his essays evoked a broader range of critical response. This perplexing quality of Trilling's work, especially its uncertain political thrust, drew the attention of some outstanding literary minds, from R. P.

Blackmur, R. W. B. Lewis, and Joseph Frank to Denis Donoghue, Lewis Simpson, and Irving Howe. Nearly all their reviews deal with Trilling's books, not with the person behind them; they dance around an enigma, a felt need for explanation. "Part of the pleasure of seeing Mr. Trilling's essays brought together surely consists in finding out what he has been up to all along," wrote Blackmur in 1950. But Trilling himself was seen by many friends, colleagues, and students as someone hard to pin down, genial but detached, in spite of the familiar personal tone he deployed so well. Even the reminiscences published after his death are remarkably free of revealing detail, as if answering to his own lifelong reticence. The private man eluded his friends as much as the essays puzzled many of his readers.

This wall of privacy began to crumble in 1979 when his widow, Diana Trilling, published an account of his ordeal in gaining tenure as a Jew teaching English at Columbia in the 1930s. Then in *Partisan Review* in 1984 came a selection from his journals, and finally in 1993 Mrs. Trilling brought out *The Beginning of the Journey*, a vinegary memoir of the first decades of their marriage. It was written with a kind of tough love, as if only an absolute fidelity to the truth could be faithful to his memory. Despite her bracing force and clarity, all the more remarkable in a writer approaching ninety, Mrs. Trilling could fall into pettiness, recalling minor slights and settling old scores sixty years later. (She describes complaining to her analyst of her husband's "repeated failure to remember to put out the garbage.") She understates her own disabling problems and the burden they must have placed on Trilling. But the book also disclosed that a man whom many had seen as the very soul of civility could also be depressive, alcoholic, abusive to his wife, and inhumanly remote to his students.

Diana Trilling's book was part tribute, part revelation, part declaration of independence by someone who felt she had dwelled too long in her husband's shadow. But it was also a loving portrait that made the man more complex and interesting than he had ever seemed, while it shattered the facade that, by her own account, he had spent a lifetime shoring up. Mrs. Trilling presented her husband as someone riven by sharp inner conflicts, at times beset by depression and rage, yet shielded from friends and colleagues by a wall of discretion and restraint. It seems safe to say that though *The Beginning of the Journey* will scarcely be the last word, anything written about Trilling in the future will undoubtedly take more account of the man himself. This has been true of the modern writers in general as biographies and personal letters and time itself have sharply altered our sense of who they were.

To the students of my generation who studied with him at Columbia in the late fifties and early sixties, a decade after *The Liberal Imagination* had made

him famous, Trilling was already something of a legendary figure, the intellectual conscience of the undergraduate English Department, the entrepreneur of distinguished book clubs, a link to the turbulent world of the New York intellectuals, and above all a teacher and critic who was dangerous to emulate and virtually impossible to please. Trilling's soft voice, twinkling ironic manner, and elaborate politeness cloaked a demanding toughness that all his students quickly encountered. His face had a perpetually worried look; the furrowed brow and dark shadows around his eyes seemed to speak of the agonies and responsibilities of the intellectual life. His demeanor, which was exactly the same in public and private, combined lightness and *gravitas*, and he could make a joke even about his deepest concerns. He has sometimes been castigated as a spokesman for middle-class values, but once, when asked by a wide-eyed David Suskind on public television if there was one thing in the culture we could do without, he said wryly, "the middle class."

Trilling was especially concerned that teaching literature, especially modern literature, would reduce its exigency to a pedagogical routine. In his lecture course on modern writers in the spring of 1960, he announced to us right at the beginning that he was heartily sick of undergraduate critical writing, tired of all the gestures of existential urgency that went into it. In disgust he had thought of asking each of us to write a straight biographical report on one of the authors—to be graded on style alone. In an atmosphere that prized critical thinking over all things, this was a calculated insult, however genially delivered. He didn't follow through, of course: it was only a shock tactic to bring home his demand that we take these writers more personally, take their presumed assault on us to heart.

When his famous essay on the teaching of modern literature appeared in *Partisan Review* six months later, we were irate to find ourselves held up to ridicule as examples of benign insensitivity. There was no mention here of writing biographical sketches of the modern writers, only of rising to their spiritual challenge, which we manifestly failed to do. "When the term-essays come in, it is plain to me that almost none of the students have been taken aback by what they have read: they have wholly contained the attack. . . . I asked them to look into the Abyss, and, both dutifully and gladly, they have looked into the Abyss, and the Abyss has greeted them with the grave courtesy of all objects of serious study, saying: 'Interesting, am I not? And exciting . . .'" He had hauled the moderns into the classroom, but there was no way to convince him that far from taking them in stride, we found them as thrilling and problematic as they had seemed to his own generation, some forty years earlier. I've now read enough undergraduate writing to appreciate the exasperation that can come from poring over too many rou-

tine, even competent accounts of serious subjects. But this hardly explains why a famous professor would satirize his students for the convenience of a literary argument.

Our vanity, our cocky sense of our own brilliance, was wounded by this skewed report of what had actually taken place in the classroom. Yet we respected him hugely for his crankiness, his impossible standards, his refusal to be merely nice. Trilling seemed impervious to the kind of showy undergraduate cleverness that impressed some of our other teachers. But he himself was not at his best in a lecture course, where the pressure he felt to say something fresh and spontaneous conflicted with the rhetorical demands of reaching a large audience.

He was no performer, but he did not spare himself for failing to rise to the occasion. Once, in what seemed like a wholly improvised lecture on Kafka, he began musing about how difficult it was to talk about *The Trial*. He described approaching each of his colleagues in turn, asking them for something to say about this elusive novel. They had a great deal to say, he reported, and much of it was quite brilliant, but somehow it was not what he wanted to say, not exactly the right thing. Perhaps, he implied, no critical language, no display of analytical energy could quite measure up to it. Perhaps an appalled and silent awe, or some sense of horror, was the right response to such an unsettling work. On that day at least, we heard the genuine sound of silence in the casual flow of his associations, his lecture about not being able to lecture.

But that day was the exception. Generally, Trilling needed the give and take of a small class to bring out what was best in him. He seemed bored by his own ideas, tired of the sound of his own voice; he needed something unexpected to react to, some angle he hadn't anticipated. This was rarely possible in the formal setting of the lecture room. Still, we admired even the *Partisan Review* essay for the way it projected Trilling's ideal course on modern writers, the one we missed having.

As a teacher, Trilling had no body of knowledge to convey, no methodology. By and large he saved his ideas for his writing, where he exercised an exquisite tact that emerged only sporadically in the classroom. Like his own teacher, Mark Van Doren, who had just retired, he taught by example, not precept. What meant most to him was to be possessed by a book, to be disoriented and changed by it. His quarrel with the New Critics and with academic scholars was that they saw literature, even modern literature, as an object of knowledge, not as a source of power, a verbal enactment of will and desire. To Trilling, the writer was someone determined to impose himself, to make something happen; as a critic, Trilling's inclination was to pay attention "to the poet's social and personal will . . . to what the poet *wants*."

The one reservation in his tribute to Edmund Wilson is that while the older critic admires many writers, "he is never astonished by them, or led to surrender himself to them." After Trilling's death Irving Howe wrote about the edginess of Trilling's engagement with literature, how he would "circle a work with his fond, nervous wariness, as if in the presence of some force, some living energy, which could not always be kept under proper control—indeed, as if he were approaching an elemental power." Trilling talked about books as if they might rise up and attack him; he was especially fond of quoting Auden's remark that books read us as much as we read them.

Trilling opened himself to books in ways he found hard to expose himself to actual human beings. His considerable demeanor and limpid ingratiating prose disguised more than they revealed. Trilling once brought down on his head the wrath of the cultural guardians when he tried to penetrate the disguises of Robert Frost, to look behind his public mask. Frost himself was pleased to be taken seriously, though he once wrote to his friend Sidney Cox, "I have written to keep the over-curious out of the secret places of my mind both in my verse and in my letters to such as you." In a Blakean couplet Trilling quoted to justify his unusual birthday tribute to the poet, Frost put this even better:

We dance round in a ring and suppose,
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.

Diana Trilling's memoir makes a great issue of Trilling's own acts of concealment. She portrays him as a man nobody knew, bowed down by heavy burdens of family responsibility, conflicted and often depressed in private, kindly but self-protective in company. Though closely identified with Freud—to the extent that the *New York Times Book Review* commissioned him to review each of the three volumes of Ernest Jones's biography—he "made a point of not mentioning his own analysis at college or anywhere. . . . [H]e had a public image to protect, perhaps especially at Columbia." She describes how he became a symbolic figure for his students, a "moral exemplar" who was a focus of their fantasies and ambitions, as Mark Van Doren had been for Trilling's generation. "Lionel did not create or encourage this image. Consciously he scorned it. Yet unconsciously he conspired in it. . . . Like a father who instinctively conceals his shortcomings from his offspring lest their respect for him be diminished, he was at pains not to reveal human fallibilities which had sent him into analysis."

Mrs. Trilling's own fallibilities were virtually impossible to conceal; her phobias must have placed great demands on those around her. But she was also more downright and direct in her response to people: invariably blunt yet closely attentive to everyone she met, she was prone to tell them exactly

what she thought. Trilling, on the other hand, seemed distant, genial, and ironic. He could be very caring with his best and flakiest students; he might encourage and take a special interest in them, as he did with Allen Ginsberg, or with the fictional Tertan in his 1943 story "Of This Time, Of That Place." But his standards were so severe that some writers who had been his students (such as Ivan Gold) found his patronage unnerving, as if his critical eye were always peering over their shoulder. Even established writers such as Saul Bellow and John O'Hara would be unnerved as he alternately bestowed and withheld his approval of their work. There was a genuine anguish behind this caprice: I sensed that Trilling lived in fear of pronouncing a wrong judgment or perpetrating a bad sentence.

In later years he turned more lofty, and Mrs. Trilling berates him for allowing his students to see him as invulnerable. When a former student, now a colleague, comes by to confess his fears about approaching fatherhood, Trilling remains graciously remote, as if he himself had never experienced such cares. "When the young man left, I turned on Lionel in a fury. Who was he to allow such a distinction between himself and the rest of the world?"

This recollection struck home with me since I too had been a student and then a colleague who, at an impressionable point in my life, had seen Trilling as a role model and a mentor, someone who demonstrated the kind of power and eloquence and public reach a literary critic could have. I wouldn't have dreamed of consulting him about a personal problem, or showing him my own vulnerability. Instead I took his remoteness as some kind of rejection, and gradually learned not to expect his blessing, but rather to look to myself and to close friends for direction. The one painful episode I had with Trilling came in my first year of teaching at Columbia. I had just submitted a thesis on Keats to the Yale English faculty and, in a moment of spontaneous generosity, Trilling asked if he could read it. Keats was a special passion of his, the subject of his longest and richest essay. It was natural that he should be curious to read it but equally natural, for him at least, that he proved unable to do so, even after it appeared as a book.

I must have sealed my fate when I mentioned that one of my Yale readers—I think it was Cleanth Brooks—had called it "Trillingsque." (It was not at all clear that he meant it as a compliment.) There were other influences that were more important—if anything, the book carried on a covert argument with Trilling's essay—but it was too late to take back what I had tactlessly reported to him. When it became clear that he was *not* going to read it, I tried, politely but insistently, to relieve him of the burden, but he adamantly refused to let it go. Was it self-absorption, ambivalence, or a subtle form of aggression that kept him from either reading or relinquishing it? Each time we met he would assure me in the strongest terms that there

was nothing he wanted to read more, especially as he himself was somehow in it. I had foolishly tried to give him a selfish reason to be interested in what I had done. Unfortunately, it seemed, to examine his reflection in someone else's work was more than he could bear, and for years it created a barrier that made other conversation difficult. At each encounter there was an elephant in the room: the mild guilt feelings he felt obliged to express, the keen disappointment I somehow failed to conceal.

Our long acquaintance, always cordial, settled into a series of missed connections. I only got his full attention when I criticized him, as when I praised in passing a Delmore Schwartz essay that had attacked him, or when I wrote to him to question his description of Whittaker Chambers as a "man of honor," to which he replied with a carefully argued letter, almost lawyerly in tone, that was clearly meant to be part of the ultimate public record. As fame multiplied the demands on him, his protective shell hardened. But his discretion and reserve must have preceded the time he had a public image to sustain. Some of his detachment was admirable, and contributed to his stature. He rarely allowed himself to be sucked into the quarrels of the New York intellectuals or the intense backbiting on the Columbia campus. He resisted signing petitions, and generally took the long view, especially where politics was concerned.

His Arnoldian detachment, his need to examine every side of the question, gave him purchase as a critic but took its toll on him as a person. By temperament he was prone to second thoughts and hesitations, and this left him ineffective in faculty deliberations. Because he held so much back, I knew him better from his books than from his considerable presence. As students we had all imagined that "Lionel Trilling," which sounded so euphoniously English, was a constructed personality, though we wrongly assumed he had changed his name, as had other New York Jewish intellectuals who felt burdened by their modest origins. We knew nothing of his early explorations of Jewish identity in numerous stories and reviews for the *Menorah Journal* in the 1920s.

I learned from a later essay (his tribute to Robert Warshow) that he had sparked resentment by refusing to associate himself with *Commentary* when it started in 1945, though his friend and mentor Elliot Cohen was its founding editor. Trilling may have been trying to separate himself as much from Cohen's overbearing influence—he could be an intrusive, domineering editor—as from any overtly Jewish institution. But just a year earlier, in *Commentary*'s predecessor publication, the *Contemporary Jewish Record*, Trilling had responded to a symposium of writers under forty by distancing himself even more dramatically from any institutional Jewish culture. "I do not think of myself as a 'Jewish writer,'" he wrote. "I do not have it in mind

to serve by my writing any Jewish purpose. I should resent it if a critic of my work were to discover in it either faults or virtues which he called Jewish." Trilling conceded that his position showed "a certain gracelessness—if only because millions of Jews are suffering simply because they have the heritage that I so minimize in my own intellectual life." Resisting the tribal claims of "the unimaginable sufferings of masses of men," Trilling could hardly acknowledge what was happening to the Jews of Europe in 1944. As he saw it, any self-consciously Jewish writer only intensified his own exclusion from "the general life" and showed "a willingness to be provincial and parochial."

In bracketing the Jewish themes that had engaged him in his early work, Trilling was determined above all to become an *American* writer, to join the mainstream and participate in the common life. But this was exactly the moment when American literature was being ethnicized, when writers like Richard Wright, Saul Bellow, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Bernard Malamud, and Alfred Kazin were taking a hyphenated path *into* the mainstream, leaving the Anglophile manner behind. Behind these writers lay Kafka, Dostoevsky, Mark Twain, even Sholom Aleichem rather than Trilling's beloved English models. By comparison with these new ethnically accented but scarcely parochial books, Trilling's 1947 *roman à these*, *The Middle of the Journey*, feels abstract and dislocated, as Robert Warshow pointed out with some harshness in one of the best essays ever written on Trilling.

The urbanity to which Trilling aspired was the style of the city, the style of the center. It was worldly and cosmopolitan, rather than local; like E. M. Forster, Trilling was drawn to the abstract dilemmas of the moral life, not the embodied, situated identities of particular lives. But the culture of the city had changed—it was growing polycentric—and Trilling paid the price for his detachment, as he had feared from the outset of his career. The emotional sources that might have nourished a career in fiction were blocked. In his journals we see his ambivalence writ large. He broods over the freewheeling lives of writers like Hemingway and the young Kerouac, identifying art with adventure, narcissism, and even criminality. But even as his acute self-consciousness hobbled his fiction, his ambivalence gave power to his criticism.

Trilling's awareness of his need for concealment was as great as Frost's. His first contribution to the *Menorah Journal*, "Impediments," published before he turned twenty, was a precocious story with implications that rippled out over his next fifty years. Indeed, it may have been the most self-revealing thing he ever wrote. Little more than a slight undergraduate anecdote, it describes a dormitory encounter between the cynical, supercilious narrator and his earnest friend Hettner, "a scrubby little Jew" who is trying to break through his crust of witty sarcasm. "I did not like the

fellow," the narrator admits. Though Hettner makes no overt demands on him and gives no sign of wanting to further their "slight acquaintance," the narrator tries to keep their talk as impersonal as possible: "I felt always defensive against some attempt Hettner might make to break down the convenient barrier I was erecting against men who were too much of my own race and against men who were not of my own race and hated it. I feared he would attempt to win into the not-too-strong tower I had built myself, a tower of contemptible ivory perhaps, but very useful. . . . [T]here was a straining eagerness about him, an uncertain fugitive air that put me on my guard lest he come to me for a refuge I did not want to give." The narrator's problem with Hettner is not simply that the man is too Jewish and too eager, or that he grew up poor and doesn't dress very well—we're told that his "untidy blue serge gives him the look of a shop assistant"—or that he is too widely read, too immersed in ideas, too obviously an intellectual; his problem is that Hettner may reveal himself to him, may force "obnoxious" confidences on him, and in the process show how much alike they are: "Hettner had come in for what he would call an intelligent and serious conversation; that is, he wanted to talk about himself, to give me hints as to what he really was, to tell me things about his soul. I could see that easily. Now, I do not want to know about people's souls; I want people quite entirely dressed; I want no display of fruity scabs and luscious sores. I like people's outsides, not their insides, and I was particularly reluctant to see this man's insides; they would be, probably, too much like mine." Finally the narrator's impregnable sarcasm and distance, his cold propriety, deflect Hettner; invincible in his tower, the narrator parries every thrust, "and I, whose victories were few enough, smiled at that victory of mine." But Hettner, as he turns to leave, wins the last round. "What a miserable dog you are," he says, not very loud, as a parting shot.

Though Mrs. Trilling identifies the protagonist of the story with Trilling and Hettner with a friend of his, Henry Rosenthal, who later became a rabbi and then a teacher of philosophy, it would be unwise to take the off-putting narrator, who dares us to dislike him, simply as the young Trilling. Rather, like Eliot's Prufrock, he is the kind of persona on whom the modernist writer projects his own most ambiguous qualities, in this case his defensiveness, his fear of experience, the barriers he erects against other people. Hettner, in turn, is that other modernist figure, the secret sharer, the despised and threatening double, who embodies the more ethnic Jewishness, the neediness and vulnerability that the narrator instinctively resists. And Hettner's parting shot is yet another modern device, the twist that turns the story upon itself, recoiling against its own point of view. This ironic reversal would become a specialty of later Jewish-American writers, including Nor-

man Mailer in "The Time of Her Time," Bernard Malamud in "The Last Mohican," and Philip Roth in "Defender of the Faith," all writers adroit at Jewish introspection and self-exposure, the very qualities Trilling's protagonist disclaims, even as he mercilessly dissects his own behavior.

In some posthumously published notes for a 1971 lecture, Trilling mentions yet another feature of modern writing that shaped his generation, what he calls "the unmasking principle" dear to intellectuals since the French Revolution. Marx and Freud, he says, "taught the intellectual classes that nothing was as it seemed, that the great work of intellect was to strike through the mask." This last phrase, which comes from one of Captain Ahab's fiery speeches, can be applied to what Trilling himself did in "Impediments," and what he largely failed to do in his later fiction. Nothing weakens his fiction more than the paleness of the author's surrogates, such as John Laskell in *The Middle of the Journey*—stiff, dimly embodied figures who are little more than vehicles for the writer's subtle, self-questioning intelligence. Trilling himself had the perpetually concerned look of someone wary of entanglements, who examined everything through a fine moral prism. This vantage point of the sensitive observer, of someone who stands apart, damaged his fiction but gave strength to his criticism. He had remarkable empathy for writers in conflict, writers under pressure like Fitzgerald and Keats and Isaac Babel, but also for writers who developed a stoical mask for surviving such pressure, like Wordsworth and Santayana.

Trilling's 1956 piece on George Santayana is, like so many of his best essays, a sketch for a self-portrait—in this case the portrait of someone (like the narrator of "Impediments") who "was manifestly not a sweet man" but rather "defined himself in the universe by detachment from it." In a typically disarming opening, Trilling writes: "One doesn't have to read very far in Santayana's letters to become aware that it might be very hard to like this man—that, indeed, it might be remarkably easy to dislike him." Partly speaking for himself, Trilling ascribes Santayana's "brilliant youthful reserve" to his "knowledge of the abyss, the awareness of the discontinuity between man and the world." He notes that Santayana lost hope early, but that this did not propel him towards nihilism; it did not cause him to devalue the world or even to abjure friendship, but "its limits were clear to him very early and he never permitted himself to be deceived into thinking that a friend was himself. Nothing could be more striking than Santayana's equal devotion and remoteness in his youthful letters to his friends. He put all his intelligence and all his sympathy at their service, but never himself."

What redeems Santayana for Trilling, what he identifies with strongly, is the unwavering quality of his self-definition. "That he was a good man has been questioned," Trilling concludes, "and the question seems to me a very

reasonable one—there is something deeply disquieting about his temperament. But there can be no doubt of the firmness of his self-definition; there can be no doubt that he did not peter out." A decade later the same themes surface darkly in a review of Joyce's letters, where Trilling notes the contrast between Joyce's ferocious commitment to art and his equally complete detachment from other people, except for his immediate family. This apartness is modified only superficially as Joyce grows older. "By his middle years Joyce had developed a talent, if not for friendship, then at least for friendliness; . . . there sounds a note of geniality, often of a whimsical kind, which, as the reviewers noted, is at variance with what is often reported of his forbidding reserve." Even with its darker shadings, this "reserve" was one of Trilling's favorite motifs. It was one of many neglected nineteenth-century qualities that he came to admire. The Joyce essay takes special pleasure in exploring the Victorian side, the almost archaic temperament, of a great modern writer.

Trilling's fascination with Joyce's old-fashioned qualities of will, detachment, grandiose ambition, and class consciousness was both temperamental and cultural. Despite his affinity for Freud, or perhaps because of it, Trilling hated the modern therapeutic culture of self-exposure, confessional intimacy, and psychological manipulation. Just as the protagonist of "Impediments" prefers people's outsides to their messy insides, the Victorian virtues were a refuge for Trilling, an alternative to the modern insistence on transparency and authenticity that goes back to Rousseau. For Trilling, Freud was the last of the great Victorians, and Trilling identified at least as much with his character as with his ideas; he admired Freud's probity, his work ethic, his almost Napoleonic determination to impose himself, his clear-eyed persistence in old age, and finally his stoicism and fortitude in the face of death. He too did not peter out.

In a less heroic, more Woody Allen-like vein, I can offer an anecdotal counterpart to these revealing essays. Trilling once interrupted a faculty meeting to express his concern that a departmental assistant didn't speak to him and seemed to dislike him. Several colleagues quickly assured him that the student in question was no doubt awed by him and his reputation. Trilling seemed greatly relieved. "Oh, it's not rudeness, you think," he said triumphantly. "It's just manly reserve." I was charmed by this. He had heard what they said but had translated it into his own terms. In some ways he was living in another century, and took a certain comic pleasure in being out of touch.

Between comments like this and writings like "Impediments," or the essays on Santayana and Joyce, I began to understand why I had never gotten past the barrier of civility that shielded him. Trilling himself recalled rather

starchily in 1966 that when he was young, "seniority was more of a bar to communication than it has since become." But difference of age or temperament was hardly the whole story. He wrote a brief memoir of his troubled relationship to one of his own teachers, Raymond Weaver, who for years had blown hot and cold toward him. He recalls how Weaver tried to get him fired before becoming his strongest supporter. Trilling fought for his job, and Weaver, who "set great store by anger," eventually relaxed his "characteristic reserve" towards him. Trilling who was exactly my father's age; I must have unconsciously appealed for the kind of paternal approval he found hard to give, especially to me. Like Hettner I no doubt seemed needy and over-eager, effusively intellectual, always at risk of baring my soul. I had grown up in the immigrant cauldron of the Lower East Side; like Hettner I was inescapably Jewish in a style that disturbed him. I could be restrained, even stoical, but no one would have mistaken it for "manly reserve."

The ambivalence that Trilling habitually acted out, and described openly in his fiction and journals, became one of the sources of his vitality as a critic. Its greatest gift to him was his style, with its ironic distance, its mask of civility, and above all its sinuous dialectical turnings as he restlessly tried on one viewpoint after another. There's a palpable vein of Jewish insecurity in Trilling's subtle modulations. He evolved his conversational manner not simply out of the familiar essay of the nineteenth century but from his dialogue with himself, which also turned on conflicts in the larger culture. Like all good writers, he projected his divided feelings into a picture of the world. In the opening essay of *The Liberal Imagination* this became a kind of credo: "A culture is not a flow, nor even a confluence—it is nothing if not a dialectic. And in any culture there are likely to be certain artists who contain a large part of the dialectic within themselves, their meaning and power lying in their contradictions." Instinctively, but also out of a personal necessity, Trilling made this contentious vision of art and culture a model for his critical writing.

The mask that made Trilling so elusive as a person lent exceptional interest to his essays. He was a reactive critic, attuned to each occasion, whose work cohered around shifting polarities rather than a single point of view. His emphasis varied from book to book, from decade to decade. He was ingenious at shaping his collections around themes that arise only obliquely, if at all, in each essay. The "liberal imagination" appears prismatically, not consecutively, in that book, as the "adversary culture" flickers in and out of view in *Beyond Culture*. But Trilling's shifting, open-weaved argument created enigmas that endlessly intrigued viewers, as John Rodden documents vividly in these pages. Trilling's books and essays became conversation pieces, markers of the cultural moment, and he himself became a

secular cleric to a generation of postwar intellectuals that looked to literature rather than to politics or religion for guidance.

Weaned on modernism, Trilling's literary generation aimed to strike through the mask, but one of *his* achievements was to construct an absorbing series of masks that gave full play to his opposing selves. He grew uneasy with the far-reaching social visions of modernism, especially its hunger for apocalyptic transformation. Instead, he offered his contemporaries a model of critical refinement and sensibility in place of old utopian hopes and progressive reforms. Thinking against himself, resisting closure, endlessly reweaving and unweaving his own point of view, Trilling crafted essays that were at once tentative and definitive, transparent and inexhaustible. Keeping the world at arm's length, he turned openness into something more than a style. It became a principle of mind, something baffling to encounter in person, inspiring to observe in practice, but certainly not the worst standard a young critic could find.

Editor's Acknowledgments

This collection is a selective reception history of the criticism and fiction of Lionel Trilling. To honor such a contemporary critic in this way is an unusual gesture, one that testifies to the significance and impact of his work. Indeed, in Trilling's case, not just the writer's work but the man's life have exerted strong, if fluctuating, influence on several generations of intellectuals. It seems appropriate, therefore, to gather together in a single volume a broad cross section of critical response to Trilling, whose literary reception constitutes a sharply focused lens through which readers can view the main issues of twentieth-century Anglo-American cultural and intellectual history.

Lionel Trilling and the Critics: Opposing Selves comprises an assortment of documents: short book reviews, essay-reviews, articles from intellectual quarterlies, obituaries, memoirs, and reassessments. I have selected these items with an eye variously toward their critical quality, historical significance, biographical interest, generational importance, ideological slant, and general representative value.

As a contribution to intellectual history, this collection has a dual aim: to illuminate the unfolding of Trilling's literary reputation and to recapture the lively debates in American cultural politics to which his writings contributed (and continue to stimulate in our own day). In selecting the materials for this volume, I have chosen responses to Trilling by influential intellectual contemporaries and successors in the United States, writers whose work possesses its own intrinsic interest. Moreover, to illustrate Trilling's high standing in the United Kingdom, which reflected and, in turn, elevated his reputation in American intellectual-academic circles, I have included a number of responses to Trilling from influential British intellectuals. Each document included in this book is preceded by a biographical headnote that discusses the author of the selection and, in most instances, highlights the key claims of the item, places it in the context of its author's career, and/or clarifies its author's relationship to Trilling.

My work on Lionel Trilling emerged via my twin, related interests in the

intellectual quarterly *Partisan Review*, for which publication Trilling long served as advisory editor, and the life and times of George Orwell, about whose reputation and legacy I wrote a critical study in the 1980s. Originally I intended to devote a similar book to Trilling and his influence. Although circumstances have limited me to completing this edited volume, I wish to acknowledge the many people who have given generously of their time and knowledge to my work on Trilling; their help has saved me from numerous errors of fact or interpretation as I edited this collection.

My sincere appreciation goes first to the late Diana Trilling, who corresponded with me and sat for lengthy interviews about her husband on two occasions, in 1990 and 1994, in her Claremont Avenue apartment near Columbia University. I am also grateful to acquaintances of Trilling who variously shared insights about Trilling's oeuvre, alerted me to little-known biographical facts, or otherwise enriched my understanding of Trilling's milieu and the world of the New York intellectuals: Richard Howard, Irving Howe, Alfred Kazin, Richard Kostelanetz, Steven Marcus, William Phillips, Norman Podhoretz, Gerald Stern, and George Watson.

Still other friends and colleagues assisted me by providing moral support, sharing their thoughts about the vocation and responsibility of the intellectual, and otherwise honoring my commitment to this project: Jack Bemporad, John Buettler, Daniel Burke, Paul Cantor, Erica Carson, Thomas Cushman, Pam Daniel, W. S. Di Piero, Martin Green, Jonathan Imber, John Keenan, Vincent Kling, Claude Koch, William Lee Miller, George Panichas, Tom Paulin, Jonathan Rose, and Jack Rossi.

I am especially indebted to several friends and colleagues who read the manuscript, whole or in part, at my earnest request: Morris Dickstein, Maurice du Quesnay, Steve Longstaff, Neil McLaughlin, Tom Samet, and Denise Weeks. I am deeply grateful to Rob Dowling, who devoted several afternoons to tracking down the photographs and illustrations appearing in this volume. I also thank Mark Krupnick and William E. Cain, who read the manuscript for the University of Nebraska Press and gave me both detailed criticism and warm encouragement. Doug Clayton was a model editor, not just facilitating the book's production but contributing to its intellectual shape and substance.

My Texas friends and family have helped me in countless ways. Deanna Matthews and Margaret Surratt responded to my ceaseless requests for logistical help with unceasing good will, and with a refreshing gulf stream of faith, irony, and plain common sense. Chip Wells read through an early draft carefully and skeptically, suggesting that I annotate those references in Trilling's work probably unfamiliar to readers today. Bill Shanahan displayed an analytic exuberance reminiscent of the *Partisan Review* editors in

the magazine's glory days, repeatedly challenging me to air out my own smelly little orthodoxies. Paul Rodden acted as my alter ego, asking subtle questions that made me examine critically my own opposing selves as well as those belonging to Lionel Trilling.

Two Texas friends blessed me with exceptional unselfishness. Cristen Carson read through the entire manuscript closely and handled the permissions with indomitable good cheer, serene confidence, and delightful dispatch. Beth Macom put her repertoire of talents—editorial laser beam, mental reference library, and rapier wit—in the full service of the manuscript, deftly retouching it—and unfailingly rallying my spirits in the process.

Last but not least, I owe a large debt of gratitude to three of my old Virginia colleagues. Each man is an outstanding teacher who, I believe, carries forth Trilling's rich legacy through his distinctive, exhilarating, albeit self-effacing, pursuit of the intellectual vocation: Jim Aune, an engaged critic and historian, whose intellectual integrity and enlightened tact serve as a beacon that has guided many students; Michael Levenson, a worthy successor to Trilling within my generation of scholars of British literature, whose natural grace, verbal elegance, and passionate dedication to the life of the mind have always inspired me; and Walter Sokel, a cultural historian and former Columbia student and colleague of Trilling, whose gracious manner and consummate grasp of the European intellectual tradition make him one of a dying breed of urbane scholar-intellectuals in an American academy increasingly divided between disciplinary specialists and polemical "public" intellectuals.

I dedicate this labor of love to my mother and father, Irish Catholics from County Donegal who are not so different in crucial ways from Trilling's own Russian Jewish immigrant parents. It was my parents' immigrant American dream of a "better," educated life that called their eldest son as a young man drawn—perhaps as Lionel Trilling had felt drawn—to the study of English language and literature and beyond: the call of self-cultivation toward my field of dreams.

Note on Annotations

Lionel Trilling was a public intellectual whose work was read in its time by a general audience; this volume aspires to make the critical response to his work and life available to the general reader of today. A collection of critical pieces, however, especially one that includes many book reviews, can pose a difficult challenge of appreciation and even understanding to the non-specialist reader, a challenge only intensified when its contributions date from an era that has passed. Because critics and reviewers frequently write in a shorthand that assumes contemporaries' knowledge of topics and names of immediate circulation and takes for granted that audiences will recognize the writers, book titles, issues, and other matters that the critics address, much criticism is difficult to appreciate outside of its original context.

Because of this critical shorthand, therefore, many readers, even scholars, interested in Lionel Trilling's literary reception may not know the writers and writings familiar to Trilling's contemporaries in the British and American literary public. For this reason, I have, quite selectively, annotated entries in some of the critical pieces that follow. My criteria have been accessibility and impact: I have clarified references to assist the reader to understand or appreciate a critic's claim, analogy, or specific line of argument.

Chronology

- 1905 Lionel Mordecai Trilling (LT) is born to David Trilling, an immigrant tailor from Bialystok (Poland), and Fannie Cohen Trilling, a Russian/Polish immigrant from London, in New York City on 4 July.
- 1905-21 LT grows up in the New York City suburb of Far Rockaway and on the Upper West Side.
- 1918 LT receives his bar mitzvah at the Jewish Theological Seminary after training with Max Kadushin, author of *The Rabbinical Mind* and a former student of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan.
- 1921 LT graduates from DeWitt Clinton High School, New York City, and matriculates to Columbia College at the age of sixteen.
- 1924 Along with friends Clifton Fadiman and Meyer Schapiro, LT takes John Erskine's honors course in English at Columbia, later called the Colloquium on Important Books. LT publishes his first poem ("Old Legend; New Style," a sonnet) and first essay (on Emily Bronte's poetry) in *Morningside*, Columbia College's literary magazine, in November.
- 1925 LT publishes his first short story ("Impediments"), which is also his first contribution to *Menorah Journal*, a secular Jewish magazine edited by Elliot Cohen; LT earns a B.A. from Columbia College, Columbia University.
- 1925-31 LT contributes stories and reviews to the *Menorah Journal*.
- 1926 LT completes a Master's thesis on Theodore Edward Hook, a minor Romantic poet, and is awarded an M.A. in English literature from Columbia University.
- 1926-27 LT teaches as instructor in Alexander Meiklejohn's experimental pedagogical program at the University of Wisconsin at Madison.
- 1927 LT meets Diana Rubin, his future wife.
- 1928 LT teaches evening courses at Hunter College, New York City.
- 1929-30 LT is hired as a part-time editorial assistant at *Menorah Journal*.

- 1929 LT marries Diana Rubin on 12 June; he addresses the Convention of the Intercollegiate Menorah Association in December.
- 1930 LT begins reviewing books for *The New Republic* and *The Nation*; teaches in the Menorah summer school.
- 1930-32 LT teaches as part-time instructor at Hunter College.
- 1932-33 LT participates in some meetings of the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners, a Communist front organization headed by Elliot Cohen. Diana Trilling volunteers as an administrative assistant to Cohen.
- 1932-39 LT teaches as an instructor at Columbia University, at a salary of twenty-four hundred dollars for four courses; also continues to teach in Hunter College's night school.
- 1934 LT begins a fruitful, intermittent classroom collaboration with Jacques Barzun of Columbia's French Department. LT and Barzun teach together in the Colloquium on Important Books, an innovative Columbia College course in literature and ideas.
- 1936 LT is informed by the Columbia English Department that, because of his slow progress on completing the dissertation, his contract will not be renewed; he protests the decision and gains an extension.
- 1937 *Partisan Review* is re-founded as an anti-Stalinist organ. LT contributes to the first issue.
- 1938 LT receives a Ph.D. in English from Columbia University.
- 1939 *Matthew Arnold*, LT's dissertation, is published by Norton in the United States and by G. Allen & Unwin in the United Kingdom.
- 1939-45 LT is assistant professor, Columbia University. Nicholas Murray Butler, president of Columbia, arranges the promotion. LT is the first Jew in the English Department at Columbia to rise to the ranks of the full-time faculty.
- 1942-63 LT is advisory editor, *Kenyon Review*.
- 1943 *E. M. Forster* is published by New Directions. "Of This Time, Of That Place" is published in *Partisan Review*.
- 1944 Hogarth Press publishes *E. M. Forster* in the United Kingdom.
- 1945 LT declines Elliot Cohen's invitation to join the advisory board of newly founded *Commentary* magazine, causing a breach between Trilling and *Commentary* that will last until the mid-1950s. "The Other Margaret" is published in *Partisan Review*; "The Lesson and the Secret" is published in *Harper's Bazaar*.
- 1945-48 LT is associate professor, Columbia University.
- 1946 LT writes the introduction to *The Partisan Reader*, which collects the best work of the first decade of *Partisan Review*.

- 1947 *The Middle of the Journey* is published by Viking. LT is awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship.
- 1948 Secker & Warburg publishes *The Middle of the Journey* in the United Kingdom. LT, John Crowe Ransom, and F. O. Matthiessen found the Kenyon School of Letters, a summer school in literary studies at Kenyon College in Ohio.
- 1948 LT's son James Lionel is born on July 22.
- 1948-61 LT is advisory board member, *Partisan Review*.
- 1948-65 LT is professor, Columbia University.
- 1949 *Matthew Arnold* is reissued by Columbia University Press. *The Portable Matthew Arnold* is published by Viking. *The Middle of the Journey* appears in Swedish translation.
- 1950 *The Liberal Imagination* is published by Viking.
- 1951 Secker & Warburg publishes *The Liberal Imagination* in the United Kingdom. *The Middle of the Journey* appears in French translation. LT edits and writes the introduction to *The Selected Letters of John Keats*, published by Farrar, Straus, and Young. LT is elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters; he stops teaching graduate classes, limiting himself to undergraduate lecture courses and seminars.
- 1951-63 LT is member (with W. H. Auden and Jacques Barzun) of the editorial board of the Reader's Subscription, a monthly book club, and contributes essays to its organ, *The Griffin*. When the Reader's Subscription becomes the Mid-Century Book Society in 1959, LT contributes essays to its organ, *The Mid-Century*.
- 1952 LT is appointed fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.
- 1953 LT chairs the Columbia faculty committee assigned to review the Communist affiliations of faculty and staff; based on the committee's report, one junior professor does not win a contract renewal. Delmore Schwartz publishes "The Duchess' Red Shoes" in *Partisan Review*, the first prominent attack on LT's work.
- 1955 *The Opposing Self* is published by Viking in the United States and Secker & Warburg in the United Kingdom; and in Portuguese translation. LT receives D.Litt., Trinity College, Hartford. LT is first lay speaker invited to deliver the Freud Anniversary Lecture to the New York Psychoanalytical Society, published that year as *Freud and the Crisis of Our Culture* by Beacon Press.
- 1956 *A Gathering of Fugitives*, a selection of pieces from LT's contributions to *The Griffin*, is published by Beacon Press. *The Liberal Imagination* and *The Opposing Self* appear in Spanish translation.
- 1957 Secker & Warburg publishes *A Gathering of Fugitives* in the United Kingdom.