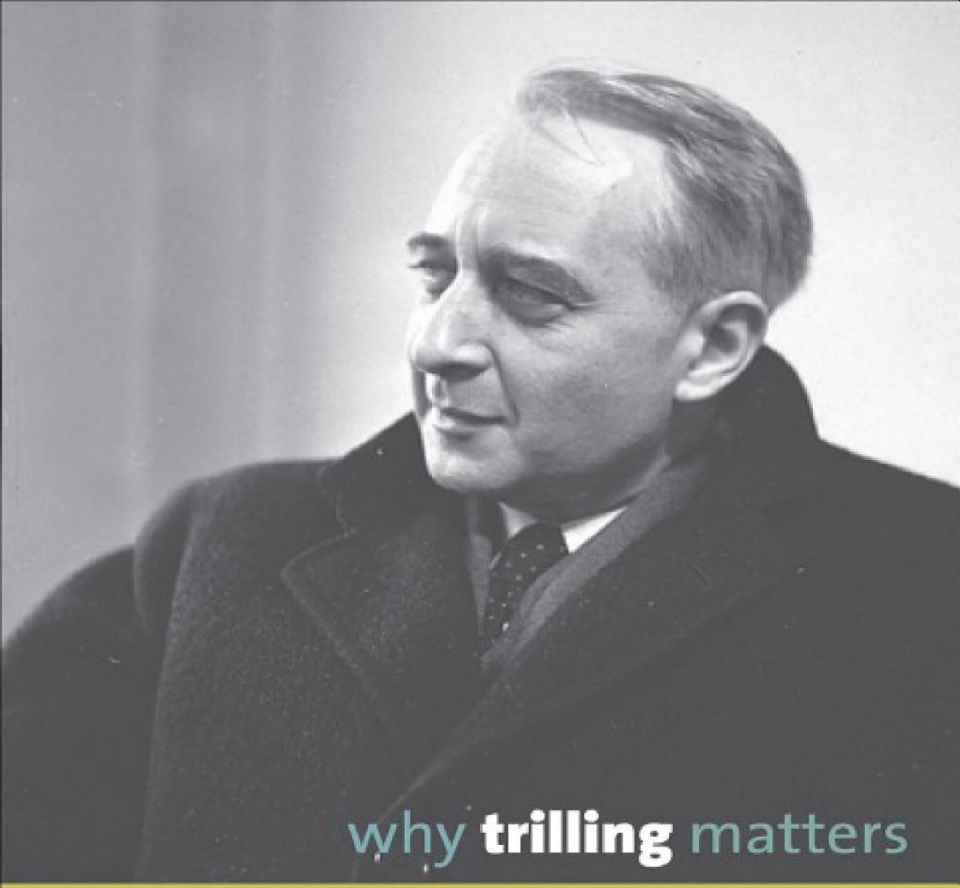

why **trilling** matters

Adam Kirsch

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contents

1
does literature matter?

"We are all a little sour on the idea of the literary life these literature days.... In America it has always been very difficult to believe that this life really exists at all or that it is worth living." To anyone who has been paying attention to the morale of American writers lately, such a diagnosis will come as no surprise. Hardly a year goes by without a novelist, poet, or critic coming forward to confess this sense of sourness, which is actually a compound of despair and resentment. Despair, because every department of literature seems to be undergoing simultaneous crisis, a multiple organ failure of the kind that inevitably leads to death; resentment, because of the contemporary American writer's sense that he has been like the final investor in a Ponzi scheme, having bought into the venerable enterprise of literature only to discover that it is on the verge of default.

Poetry, of course, was the first to go. Already in 1991, in his essay "Can Poetry Matter?" Dana Gioia declared that "American poetry belongs to a subculture. No longer part of the mainstream of artistic and intellectual life, it has become the specialized occupation of a relatively small and isolated group." As a poet, Gioia looked covetously at the attention and esteem given to fiction: "A reader familiar with the novels of Joyce Carol Oates, John Updike, or John Barth may not even recognize the names of Gwendolyn Brooks, Gary Snyder, or W. D. Snodgrass." But five years later, Jonathan Franzen lamented in his essay "Perchance to Dream" that whatever attention the novel continued to receive was

just "consolation for no longer mattering to the culture." The poet might envy the novelist, but the novelist has his own jealousies: "there are very few American milieus today in which having read the latest work of Joyce Carol Oates or Richard Ford is more valuable, as social currency, than having caught the latest John Travolta movie or knowing how to navigate the Web."

In the last few years, technological change and economic recession have combined to accelerate this long-term crisis. First local bookstores disappeared, victims of the chain stores and Amazon: since the 1990s, more than half of America's independent bookstores have closed. The newspaper book review was next: in the 2000s, the *Los Angeles Times, Washington Post,* and many other major papers shrank or eliminated their book sections. Cynthia Ozick, in her 2007 essay "Literary Entrails," performed the same kind of obsequies for literary criticism that Gioia and Franzen had done for poetry and fiction: "What is missing is an undercurrent, or call it, rather (because so much rests on it), an infrastructure, of serious criticism."

University English departments are suffering: as long ago as 1999, in an essay titled "The Decline and Fall of Literature," Andrew Delbanco observed that "Literature is a field whose constituency and resources are shrinking." Even as it lost students to more pragmatic disciplines, English was also losing its intellectual identity: "it has become routine to find notices in the department advertising lectures on such topics as the evolution of Batman … alongside posters for a Shakespeare conference." Reading itself, according to a 2004 study by the National Endowment for the Arts, is in "dramatic decline, with fewer than

half of American adults now reading literature … [and] the steepest rate of decline … occurring in the youngest age groups."

For many readers and writers, all these anxieties find their ultimate focus in a fear that the book itself, the site and symbol of literature for the last five hundred years, is about to disappear, replaced by the Kindle or iPad or something equally suspect. Margaret Atwood expressed the fears of many readers over the age of, say, thirty when she wrote, "This is crucial, the fact that a book is a thing, physically there, durable, indefinitely reusable, an object of value … electrons are as evanescent as thoughts. History depends on the written word."

At such a moment, how could we not be "a little sour on the idea of the literary life," or find it hard "to believe that this life really exists at all"? It may be surprising to learn that this complaint was made in 1952, just at the midcentury moment to which Franzen and Ozick look back so enviously. But the greater surprise is that it was Lionel Trilling who made it. For in the last twenty years, when writers have lamented the decay of literature's confidence and authority, they have often turned, as if by instinct, to Trilling as the emblem of those lost virtues. More than any twentieth-century American intellectual, Trilling stood for the principle that society and politics cannot be fully understood without the literary imagination. In his own career, he combined the traditional authority of the academic—he was a professor of English at Columbia for four decades—with the new authority of the freelance intellectual—some of his most important essays were written for "little magazines" like *Partisan Review*. His best-known book, the essay collection *The Liberal Imagination* (1950), continues to define an epoch in American intellectual history.

When he died in 1975, at the age of seventy, the critic Steven Marcus paid tribute to his "spiritual heroism" on the front page of the *New York Times.*

It is so hard, today, to imagine this kind of honor being paid to a literary critic—perhaps to any writer—that Trilling's name is often invoked as a reproach to the fallen present. According to Delbanco, the cure for the decline and fall of literature is a return to Trilling's ideal of literary education, as set forth in his essay "The Uncertain Future of the Humanistic Educational Ideal": an "exigent experience," in which "an initiate … became worthy of admission into the company of those who are thought to have transcended the mental darkness and inertia in which they were previously immersed." Ozick contrasts Franzen's longing for a mass audience with Trilling's recommendation, in "The Function of the Little Magazine," that a writer "direct his words to his spiritual ancestors, or to posterity, or even, if need be, to a coterie." This is what she describes as Trilling's "self-denying purity; purity for the sake of a higher purity."

Yet how can this help sounding like a little too much purity—like what Milton, in the *Areopagitica,* calls "an excremental whiteness"? "Assuredly we bring not innocence into the world, we bring impurity much rather; that which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary," the poet writes, and there has always been a tendency, among Trilling's critics, to rebel against an elevation which they construe as mere abstemiousness. "He never gives the impression of having read anything for the first time, of being surprised, confused, delighted, enraged, or captivated by anything he has read," Roger Sale complained in 1973. Stefan Collini, writing thirty-five years later, catches the

same tone: "There is, for many of us, something vaguely oppressive about the thought of having to reread Lionel Trilling now. We can't help feeling that we should be improved by Trilling, and this feeling is itself inevitably oppressive.... Reading him keeps us up to the mark, but we can't help but be aware that the mark is set rather higher than we are used to."

In all these descriptions, whether their intention is laudatory or the opposite, it is clear that Trilling is being assigned the role of literature's superego. As a student of Freud, Trilling himself would have known what must follow: for if the superego is the savage enforcer of unattainable cultural ideals, then the ego's health and happiness require that the superego be humbled. This need simultaneously to honor and humble Trilling is responsible for the curious ambivalence with which he is usually written about today. In the last ten years, much of Trilling's work has been brought back into print: *The Moral Obligation to Be Intelligent,* the generous selection of essays edited by Leon Wieseltier; the new editions of *The Liberal Imagination* and *The Middle of the Journey,* from New York Review Books; even the manuscript of his unfinished novel, published as *The Journey Abandoned.* And each of these publications has been greeted with considerable attention, in the form of reviews by leading critics—even if those reviews are largely defensive and skeptical in tone. Trilling is, apparently, still close enough, still authoritative enough, to need to be reckoned with, which sometimes means rejected and mocked.

There could be no more Oedipal gesture than Louis Menand's, when he marked the publication of a new edition of *The Liberal Imagination* by suggesting that Trilling was basically a pathetic figure. "He was depressive, he had writer's block, and he drank too

read difficult new works, the way Edmund Wilson does. Nor does he offer a polemical revaluation of literary history, the way F. R. Leavis does. Nor, finally, does he try to push contemporary literature in the direction of his own ambitions, the way poetcritics like T. S. Eliot and Allen Tate were doing so influentially in his lifetime.

If Trilling's essays are not exactly literary criticism, it is because they are something more primary and more autonomous: they belong to literature itself. Like poems, they dramatize the writer's inner experience; like novels, they offer a subjective account of the writer's social and psychological environment. And like all literary works, Trilling's essays are ends in themselves—they are autotelic, to use a word that Eliot coined to describe what criticism could never be. This helps to explain why there has never been a Trilling school of criticism. He does not offer the reader findings or formulas, which might be assembled into a theory; he offers what literature alone offers, an experience.

This is, of course, an experience of a more restricted and abstract kind than the poet or the novelist can give. The drama of Trilling's essays comes from the reaction of a powerfully individual sensibility, not to emotions or human situations or the world as a whole, but to certain texts and ideas. This means it occurs at two removes from life, and can never have the immediacy or breadth of appeal that creative writing has. But it is a genuine drama, because Trilling was the rare kind of writer for whom an idea is itself an experience. He may have been exaggerating when he wrote that "Ideas and moral essences are, to all people, the most interesting things in the world"; but if they aren't that to all people, they certainly were to Trilling himself.

This helps to explain two of the most important, and sometimes controversial, aspects of Trilling's style. One is his cultivation of a short list of key words, which return again and again in his essays, to the point that they seem to bear his trademark: moral, liberal, will, mind, reality. These are large and general words, and so they are natural targets for skepticism. To Collini, Trilling's "Big Words make us a little uncomfortable nowadays, and we have difficulty using them other than in a knowing, allusive way."

It is true that Trilling's key words are momentous, and that he does not fear momentousness. But it is also crucial not to ignore the deliberately tentative and exploratory way he uses them. "Moral" and "liberal," in particular, recur in Trilling's work like themes in a piece of music or symbols in a poem: rather than becoming simpler with repetition, they accumulate dimensions and implications. "Liberal" means one thing to Trilling when writing about Matthew Arnold and E. M. Forster in the 1930s and early 1940s, and something very different, almost contradictory, when he praises "the liberal imagination" in the late 1940s. Trilling had an almost poetic interest in the unfolding of these master terms, which strike such a deep chord in his imagination.

The other feature of Trilling's prose, which readers have noticed and sometimes resisted from the very beginning, is his use of the first person plural—the famous Trilling "we." His essay "Reality in America," from *The Liberal Imagination,* offers a characteristic example:

> We live, understandably enough, with the sense of urgency; our clock, like Baudelaire's, has had the hands removed and bears the legend, "it is later than you think." But with us it is always a little too late for mind, yet never too late for honest stupidity; always a little too late for

understanding, never too late for righteous, bewildered wrath; always too late for thought, never too late for naïve moralizing.

Who, one might reasonably ask, is included in this "us"? In the preface to his 1965 book *Beyond Culture,* Trilling mentioned the objection of a reviewer who "said that when I spoke of what 'we' think or feel it was often confusing because sometimes it meant 'just the people of our time as a whole; more often still Americans in general; most often of all a very narrow class, consisting of New York intellectuals as judged by [my] own brighter students at Columbia.'" Trilling genially acknowledged that "this may well be an all too accurate description of my practice."

But at least readers who encountered Trilling's essays in the pages of *Partisan Review,* or were in the audience hearing him deliver a paper (some of his most important essays started out as lectures), could feel that they were undoubtedly being addressed by him—that they belonged to Trilling's "we." Today, the device can feel coercive: isn't Trilling demanding that the reader subscribe to a cultural diagnosis which, in fact, she may want to contest? (What if I *don't* feel that my clock has had its hands removed?) Worse, it can seem to exclude: if Trilling in this passage is chastising left-liberals of the 1940s, isn't he speaking about a local, long-vanished cultural pathology, which is now of merely historical interest?

Here, again, Trilling's language must be understood in its literary intention. Poems and novels benefit from familiar conventions that make it easy for the reader to enter into the writer's experience. The lyric "I" is not as autobiographical, nor the omniscient narrator as impartial, as they appear: each is really an invitation disguised as a proposition, and their authority is not

asserted but justified (if it is justified) by the insight and pleasure that they make possible. In a similar way, Trilling, in dramatizing his own experience of a book or a writer, is offering himself up as the reader's surrogate. To enroll in Trilling's "we" is to enter into his experience, not to submit slavishly to his judgments; the commonality it expresses is provisional and literary, not sociological. Properly understood, it is a humbler form of address than if Trilling were to write "I," which would turn him into an authority handing down judgments, or to write in the third person without addressing the reader at all. His "we" is an improvised, and sometimes clumsy, attempt to make his writing about texts as involving as other people's writing about characters and plots.

It is an ironic sign of the success of this strategy that today, in our unmistakably fragmented literary culture, Trilling looks like an icon of centrality and authority—to be yearned for or despised, depending on your inclination. Ozick, who is one of Trilling's truest critical successors, yearns for it: she writes longingly of the days "when Lionel Trilling prevailed at Columbia, [and] Edmund Wilson, Irving Howe, and Alfred Kazin enlivened the magazines, decade upon decade." All of these writers were associated, at one time or another, with *Partisan Review*. Yet when Trilling wrote "The Function of the Little Magazine," his introduction to a tenth-anniversary anthology of writing from *Partisan Review,* he began by noting the irony that it was considered "a notable achievement" if a magazine devoted "to the publication of good writing of various kinds" is able to attract an audience of six thousand readers. If this was a "victory," Trilling wrote wryly, it took place in "the larger circumstance of defeat."

This is not to say, of course, that good writing never reaches a substantial audience. When *The Liberal Imagination* was published in 1950, it sold 70,000 copies in hardcover and 100,000 in paperback, numbers that might well induce an envious nostalgia. Yet consider the case of Jonathan Franzen, who in 1996 complained about the "deafening silence of irrelevance" that greeted his first two novels, despite their warm reviews. In 2001, he went on to sell millions of copies of *The Corrections,* which came as close to "mattering to the culture" as any novel of the last twenty years. Yet in 2002, Franzen published an essay about the novelist William Gaddis that began by discussing the angry letters he got about *The Corrections* from readers who found the book difficult and elitist. He felt guilty, he wrote, about violating the implied "contract" between writer and reader, since "the deepest purpose of reading and writing fiction is to sustain a sense of connectedness."

Why is it that Trilling, with his six thousand readers, felt that he had established a sense of connection with his proper audience, while Franzen, with his millions of readers, worried about the vastly greater number of people he couldn't reach? The answer must be that things like relevance, connection, and "mattering," while absolutely central to a writer's sense of success and failure, cannot be measured quantitatively. Franzen, realizing how insignificant the biggest bestseller is compared to the audience for a movie or a videogame, is haunted even in success by "the larger circumstance of defeat." Trilling, half a century earlier, faced exactly the same realization: "After all, the emotional space of the human mind is large but not infinite, and perhaps it will be pre-empted by the substitutes for literature—the radio, the movies, and

warned against. On one side, Wolfe writes, there are avant-garde writers like John Hawkes, John Barth, and Robert Coover, "brilliant … virtuosos," who write "clever and amusing" fiction within "narrow limits"; on the other, there is Wolfe himself, who embraces "the American century," who has a strong enough digestion to handle the "feast spread out before every writer in America." This is exactly the same kind of tendentious, middle-brow binarism that Trilling condemned in "Reality in America," and the summary he gives in that essay of the thought of V. L. Parrington, a once-influential literary historian, fits Wolfe to a T:

> There exists, he believes, a thing called *reality*; it is one and immutable, it is wholly external, it is irreducible. Men's minds may waver, but reality is always reliable, always the same, always easily to be known. And the artist's relation to reality he conceives as a simple one. Reality being fixed and given, the artist has but to let it pass through him, he is the lens in the first diagram of an elementary book on optics.… Sometimes the artist spoils this ideal relation by "turning away from" reality. This results in certain fantastic works, unreal and ultimately useless.

The problem with a sociological or journalistic definition of realism, Trilling perceives, is the implication that the mind and the imagination are not part of reality. As he complains in "Manners, Morals, and the Novel," "reality, as conceived by us, is whatever is external and hard, gross, unpleasant," whereas "whenever we detect evidence of style and thought we suspect that reality is being a little betrayed." *Reality Hunger,* the recent manifesto by the novelist David Shields, is far more sophisticated than Wolfe's, but even Shields demonstrates something of this same impatience with

fiction as invention: "Cut to the chase. Don't waste time. Get to the real thing," he writes.

The supreme prestige of reality in America—"the word 'reality' is an honorific word," Trilling observes—is what makes it so "very difficult to believe" that the "literary life really exists at all" here. That is because, in a sense, it does not "really" exist; it exists, but otherwise. By the same token, the current crisis of confidence in bookselling, publishing, journalism, and so on, can make it much more difficult to be a writer or a reader; but it cannot finally lead to the death of literature, because literature does not live by those things in the first place. Trilling preserved a healthy suspicion of what he considered the American prejudice in favor of the concrete and countable, the tendency to see quantity as a more real measurement than quality. The Kinsey Report, he wrote, was typically American in its "extravagant fear of all ideas that do not seem … to be, as it were, immediately dictated by simple physical fact." Because the Report's "principles of evidence are entirely quantitative," a matter of counting orgasms and sexual partners, it could never go "beyond the conclusion that the more the merrier." And if this is not a satisfactory way of measuring sexual contentment, how much less suited is it to talking about literary achievement?

"Generally speaking," Trilling wrote, "literature has always been carried on within small limits and under great difficulties." What sustains writers and readers under those difficulties is, above all, the consciousness of one another's existence. This is, in fact, the consolation that Franzen finds at the end of "Perchance to Dream": "in a suburban age, when the rising waters of economic culture have made each reader and each writer an island, it may be

that we need to be more active in assuring ourselves that a community still exists." But the name of the activity by which readers and writers communicate—by which they make the private experience of reading into the common enterprise of literature—is criticism. "The fact is," Trilling writes, "that an actual response to art (in our culture at least) depends on discourse—not upon any one kind of discourse, but upon discourse of *some* kind." That is why Gioia longs for poetry critics like the ones who flourished in the mid-twentieth century, who "charged modern poetry with cultural importance and made it the focal point of their intellectual discourse"; and why Ozick dreams of a "superior criticism [that] not only unifies and interprets a literary culture but has the power to imagine it into being."

Even Trilling, who embodied the kind of critical authority that Ozick and Gioia find us in need of, himself felt a need for the reassurance and community that only criticism can provide. His remarks about feeling sour on the literary life come in a short essay on Edmund Wilson, in which he remembers how Wilson's example sustained him during the Great Depression: "for me, and for a good many of my friends, Wilson made [the literary life] a reality and a very attractive one. He was, of course, not the only good writer of the time, but he seemed to represent the life of letters in an especially cogent way, by reason of the orderliness of his mind and the bold lucidity of his prose … and because of the catholicity of interests and the naturalness with which he dealt with the past as well as with the present."

The very terms in which Trilling praises Wilson suggest how different they are as critics. Wilson, with his confident rationalism, his cosmopolitan scope, and what Trilling calls his "old-fashioned,

undoctrinaire voracity for print," was a perfect representative of literature as a profession. Trilling, who wrote much less than Wilson and imparted a greater sense of ambivalence to what he did write, represents literature as a way of life. In the chapters that follow, I explore how Trilling's most intimate ambitions and concerns—above all, his sense of the conflict between the artist's will and the demands of justice—shape and are shaped by the different phases of his reading, writing, and teaching. By considering Trilling not just as a cultural or political figure, but as an interpreter of his own experience, I hope to emphasize the part of his achievement that has meant most to me: his demonstration of what it means to create one's self through and against the books one reads. At a time when the possibility of reading in this existentially engaged way seems to be in doubt—a development that Trilling himself foresaw—no critic could be more inspiring, or more necessary.

2
"aprofessor and a man and a writer"

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to a genuine appreciation of Trilling today is a certain interpretation of his life and work that has been growing in popularity for years, and has now become a kind of critical orthodoxy. This is the notion that Trilling was, at heart, not a great literary critic but a failed novelist, and therefore an unhappy, unsatisfied man. Once this view is accepted—and it can be found in most of the important discussions of Trilling in recent years, even the sympathetic ones—it's hard to escape the conclusion that we don't have to admire or learn from Trilling, only pity him.

The seeds of this idea were planted in 1984, when his widow Diana Trilling, herself a noted critic and intellectual, published excerpts from his journals in *Partisan Review*. Because Trilling's public demeanor had been so impressively dignified and reserved, it came as a shock to read his private expressions of dissatisfaction with his life and work, verging at moments on self-contempt. In particular, it seemed, Trilling never stopped regretting that he had not managed to become a novelist, publishing just one full-length work of fiction, *The Middle of the Journey,* and a handful of short stories. In 1961, when Ernest Hemingway died, Trilling wrote: "Except Lawrence's 32 years ago, no writer's death has moved me as much—who would suppose how much he has haunted me? How much he existed in my mind—as a reproach? He was the only writer of our time I envied." These private reflections helped to fill

But if it is true that the characters in *The Middle of the Journey* are spokesmen for ideas, it is not fair to say, as Warshow did, that this is due to Trilling's lack of an "aesthetically effective relationship to experience." Rather, what becomes clear in reading the novel is that the elements of experience that Trilling cared about most were, precisely, ideas. The human drama that interested him was the drama of individuals shaping their ideals and morals in reaction to texts.

It is striking, in fact, how many of the key episodes in the book concern reading, and how Trilling uses characters' responses to texts in order to illuminate their psychology. To Nancy Croom, Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West,* with its vision of inexorable historical cycles, is unacceptable on political grounds: it is "entirely reactionary because it cut off all hope of the future." To her neighbor Emily Caldwell, the book teaches a different lesson: "to live your life, to snatch the moment, because the cycles just keep on and on, and in the end what does anyone ever have except perhaps a little fleeting moment of happiness?" Laskell knows that Nancy's reaction is the enlightened and correct one, and feels embarrassed for Emily, who is so naïve she doesn't realize that Spengler is behind the times—that "for this book a vocabulary of discussion had existed a few years ago and had then died." Yet Trilling also makes clear that Emily's reaction has its own truth, that she is able to draw an existential lesson from Spengler that Nancy is too narrow and fearful to hear.

The different ways these two characters read a text foreshadow the ways they will react to major events in the plot, including Laskell's dangerous illness and the climactic death of Emily's young daughter Susan. Indeed, that deliberately melodramatic

ending (Trilling once wrote of "my very strong feeling … that a novel must have all the primitive elements of story and even of plot—suspense, surprise, open drama and even melodrama") is triggered by another difference of literary interpretation, having to do with the proper way to recite William Blake's poem "Jerusalem." Susan, declaiming the poem at a small-town talent show, stamps her foot childishly to accent the line "I will not cease from Mental Fight"—a gaucherie that Laskell had previously warned her against. Realizing that she has made a mistake, Susan freezes, and Laskell prompts her with the next line; whereupon her father Duck, incensed at the way Laskell has usurped his paternal role, comes out of the audience and strikes Susan down.

This is pretty far-fetched, and reading *The Middle of the Journey,* it is hard to avoid the sense that it is the literary and intellectual confrontations that really matter to Trilling, while the confrontations between characters are extensions or illustrations of them. That is exactly why Trilling's decision, after the novel was published, to turn finally from fiction to criticism was such a fruitful one. The critical essay, as Trilling wrote it, was the right genre to dramatize the collision of ideas; his essays distill the essence of his fiction, and allow him to give greater scope to the true workings of his mind than the novel or short story could. Having written his first book on Matthew Arnold, he doubtless remembered the justification Arnold offered for turning from poetry to criticism: "But is it true that criticism is really, in itself, a baneful and injurious employment; is it true that all time given to writing critiques on the works of others would be much better employed if it were given to original composition, of whatever kind this may be? Is it true that Samuel Johnson had better have

gone on producing more *Irenes* instead of writing his *Lives of the Poets*?"

Just so, three years after publishing *The Middle of the Journey,* a good novel, Trilling brought out *The Liberal Imagination,* a great work of criticism. And it would be a serious mistake to think that he didn't know it—that his regret over failing to be a novelist, voiced ironically in public and bitterly in the privacy of his diary, superseded his knowledge of what he accomplished as a critic. The cliché of the critic as thwarted creator—the eunuch in the harem—is so familiar, and so useful to readers who dislike the feeling of being "kept up to the mark" by Trilling, that it is frequently used in defiance of Trilling's express judgment.

Thus Murphy, like several other recent writers on Trilling, quotes the following sentences from his notebook, written in 1948 after he was promoted to full professor at Columbia: "Suppose I were to dare to believe that one could be a professor and a man! and a writer!—what arrogance and defiance of convention." Even Ozick reads these lines as a confession of failure, remarking: "Here was bitterness, here was regret: he did not believe that a professor could be truly a man; only the writer, with his ultimate commitment to the wilderness of the imagination, was truly a man."

But here is how the notebook entry, as published in *Partisan Review,* actually reads: "But sometimes I feel that I pay for the position not with learning but with my talent—that I draw off from my own work what should remain with it. Yet this is really only a conventional notion, picked up from my downtown friends, used to denigrate myself & my position, to placate the friends, to placate in my mind such people as Mark V[an] D[oren], who yearly seems to

me to grow weaker & weaker, more academic, less a person. Suppose I were to dare to believe that one could be a professor and a man! and a writer!—what arrogance and defiance of convention. Yet deeply I dare to believe that—and must learn to believe it on the surface." In other words, Trilling's confession of failure is exactly the reverse: it is a declaration of confidence, and a rejection of the "conventional notion" that selective quotation seems to ascribe to him. The fear that a professor and critic could not be a man and a writer was only "on the surface"; "deeply," in his conscience, he knew that he was both, that criticism was the form that best suited his literary imagination.

This is not to deny that Trilling's inability to write great fiction was significant. Born in 1905, he came of age at a time when the modern novel was experiencing its greatest triumphs: Proust, Joyce, Mann, and Lawrence were all producing their masterpieces just at the time Trilling was starting to think of himself as a writer. (When he was 22, he even reviewed the English translation of Proust's *Cities of the Plain,* one of his first published pieces.) "Being a novelist," Lawrence had written, "I consider myself superior to the saint, the scientist, the philosopher, and the poet," and Trilling almost instinctively conceded this superiority. In his unfinished novel, Harold Outram—like John Laskell a failed novelist—ruefully expresses what the novel meant to writers who started out in the 1920s:

> Ah yes—your generation no longer worships the novel. In my time it was novel or nothing. We spent our days getting ready for it, looking for experience. An *honest* novel it had to be—honest was the big word. And always one novel was what we thought of. Only one, very big, enormous. Then, having laid this enormous egg, I suppose we

> expected to die. It had to be big and explosively honest—you'd think we were collecting dynamite grain by grain, you'd think we were constructing a bomb. We expected to blow everything to bits with our honesty.

Outram's is not meant to be a trustworthy voice—having failed at literature, he has become a Communist ideologue, and he goes on to say that "Russia has perceived before any of us that the arts, about which we are so politically sentimental, are one of the great barriers in the way of human freedom and decency." But his self-satire does seem to reflect Trilling's own ironic perspective on his early novelistic ambitions.

Unlike Outram, however, Trilling's discouragement did not lead him to turn vengefully against literature itself. On the contrary, Trilling's disappointment as a novelist was the most productive experience in his literary life. To use a metaphor he mistrusted, it was the wound to his bow. For in thinking about why he could not write like the novelists he admired, Trilling was brought up against the gulf between aesthetic ideals and ethical ideals, between the energies of art and the disciplines of civilization, that would be his master subject. Only a writer who had lived this division, who allowed it to shape his destiny, could have written about it as movingly and insightfully as Trilling does. "It is one of the necessities of successful modern story," Trilling wrote apropos of Henry James, "that the author shall have somewhere entrusted his personal fantasy to the tale." In this sense, above all, his own criticism is literary in inspiration.

Trilling's notebook entries show that he returned to this question—the price of art, and whether it was worth paying—throughout his life, in the most personal terms. As early

literature and life, cannot escape. In this way, Trilling became the kind of writer that he praised in "Reality in America":

> A culture is not a flow, nor even a confluence; the form of its existence is struggle, or at least debate—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; they contain within themselves, it may be said, the very essence of the culture, and the sign of this is that they do not submit to serve the ends of any one ideological group or tendency.

3
varieties of liberal imagination

"A writer's reputation often reaches a point in its career where what he actually said is falsified even when he is correctly quoted," Trilling observed in the preface to his first book, *Matthew Arnold.* "It is very easy for Arnold's subtle critical dialectic to be misrepresented and for his work to be reduced to a number of pious and ridiculous phrases about 'the grand style,' 'culture,' 'sweetness and light.'" It seems fitting, then, that Trilling, who modeled his career on Arnold's in certain ways and found in him a kindred spirit, should have his own reputation follow the same course and reach the same point. He, too, is commonly reduced to a few famous phrases, most of which come from one book—*The Liberal Imagination*—and especially from that book's preface. It is here that Trilling writes that "in the United States at this time, liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition"; and describes his own mission as "putting under some degree of pressure the liberal ideas and assumptions of the present time"; and urges that liberals must learn from literature the "essential imagination of variousness and possibility, which implies the awareness of complexity and difficulty."

If the goal of a preface is to give readers a simple, catching summary of a complex work, to make a book seem immediately relevant, then the preface to *The Liberal Imagination* has succeeded only too well. It allows readers to believe that Trilling was primarily a critic of the political illusions of the American left in the postwar period. The preface is dated December 1949, just

months before the start of the Korean War, which makes it even more tempting to read the book as a symptom of America's retreat from New Deal liberalism, into a more guarded and self-critical Cold War liberalism. One of the best recent studies of Trilling, *The Conservative Turn* by Michael Kimmage, pairs him with Whittaker Chambers—who, unlike Trilling, belongs to the history of politics, rather than literature—and interprets his literary values in immediately political terms. "An art that was morally complex and free from self-righteousness," Kimmage writes, "would express the spirit of political anti-communism." Similarly, on the back cover of the most recent edition of *The Liberal Imagination,* the reader is informed that it appeared during "one of the chillier moments of the cold war," and in the introduction that "the first thing to say about *The Liberal Imagination* is that it is a cold war book."

This way of looking at Trilling, as an ideologist of liberal anti-Communism, is of course not wrong. He was involved in the soul-searching debates among the erstwhile radicals of the *Partisan Review* circle, and he was convinced that liberal indulgence of Stalinism was a political and cultural disaster. But to read *The Liberal Imagination* simply as a document of its time is to underestimate Trilling's literary achievement, and implicitly to deny that it still matters today. There are no more fellow-travellers in American intellectual life—there is nothing left to fellow-travel with. Liberals in the age of Obama face plenty of challenges, and even some temptations, but they are not the same ones that liberals faced in the age of Truman. If *The Liberal Imagination* is still a living work, then—and the excitement it can still produce in readers proves that it is—it must be more than a Cold War book.

One way to gauge the breadth and complexity of Trilling's purpose, in fact, is to notice the ways in which he designed the book to resist a parochial political reading. To take *The Liberal Imagination* as a guide to politics or political philosophy—to seek in Trilling's liberalism for the liberalism of Roosevelt and Truman, or of Locke and Mill—is a recipe for frustration. By far the most misleading sentence in the "Preface" is the one in which Trilling deplores the liberal tendency to trust too much in "delegation, and agencies, and bureaus, and technicians": this amounts to a red herring, since liberalism in the sense of an activist state is virtually absent from the book. The word liberal, as Trilling uses it, is deliberately elusive: what it names is at once an emotional tendency, a literary value, an intellectual tradition, and a way of being in the world. Only sometimes, and as it were incidentally, does Trilling speak of liberalism as a position in American politics.

This happens most directly, perhaps, in one of the least famous essays in the book, "Kipling," where Trilling laments the swaggering imperialism of Rudyard Kipling's work—not for itself, but because it presents liberals with such an easy target for moral condescension. "Kipling was one of liberalism's major intellectual misfortunes," Trilling writes, because "he tempted liberals to be content with easy victories of right feeling and with moral self-congratulation." So easy was it to despise Kipling's cult of manliness and militarism that, Trilling recalls, his own generation came to despise courage itself as reactionary: "I remember that in my own undergraduate days we used specifically to exclude physical courage from among the virtues." This recollection gives Trilling's "us," in this context, an especially local and personal feel: when he writes that "for many of us our rejection of [Kipling]

was our first literary-political decision," he is counting on readers of his generation and background to agree.

In this way, "Kipling" carries out the program of the Preface pretty exactly: it criticizes a liberal shibboleth from within the liberal ranks. In both the Preface and "Kipling," Trilling alludes to the same passage from John Stuart Mill's essay on Coleridge, in which the liberal philosopher praised the conservative poet and "said that we should pray to have enemies who make us worthy of ourselves." Since his own generation has no such respectable conservative voice to learn from, only unfashionable reactionaries like Kipling, it is up to a liberal like himself to insist on the wisdom hiding behind Kipling's bluster.

Trilling notices, for instance, the way "Kipling's sympathy was always with the administrator and he is always suspicious of the legislator." Trilling does not exactly endorse this view—he calls it "foolish, but … not the most reprehensible error in the world"—but he senses in it a lesson the statist liberal might well learn, having to do with the difference between framing a benevolent law and effectively carrying it out. A better conservative than Kipling "might make clear to the man of principled theory, to the liberal, what the difficulties not merely of government but of *governing* really are." It is not so far from this empiricist skepticism to the impulse that led some New York intellectuals, in the 1960s, to critique the welfare state in Irving Kristol's magazine *The Public Interest.* At such moments, the intellectual genealogy that connects Trilling with neoconservatism becomes visible.

In the same years that he was writing the essays collected in *The Liberal Imagination,* Trilling published a number of pieces in the

decades of Trilling's life as a writer. The origins of this crisis are hard to trace in the book itself, though they would have been understood implicitly by many of its first readers, since Trilling's experience was the common one of his literary generation. As a teenager and young adult during the 1920s, he came of age in a climate of triumphant modernism, when American culture was undergoing a liberating renaissance. Then, just as he entered adulthood, the crash of 1929 and the subsequent Depression brought this period to a terrifying halt. The mood among writers became harshly self-critical: What had the modernist experiment really been worth, if it left readers blind to imminent social catastrophe?

Even worse, for liberals, was the fact that so many of the modernist masters appeared to side with the forces of reaction, which were triumphant in Europe. As Trilling was to observe time and again, "Yeats and Eliot, Proust and Joyce, Lawrence and Gide—these men do not seem to confirm us in the social and political ideals which we hold." Was it not the writer's duty, at a moment of crisis, to join in the struggle for a better society, for the revolution—and to use his talent as a weapon in the struggle? In 1932, Edmund Wilson led a group of prominent writers (including John Dos Passos and Sherwood Anderson) in circulating a "Manifesto" that proclaimed: "in our function as writers, we declare ourselves supporters of the social-economic revolution—such revolution being an immediate step toward the creation in the United States of a new human culture based on common material possession, which shall release the energies of man to spiritual and intellectual endeavor."

This same urgency erupts in Trilling's early writing with shocking suddenness. As late as 1930, in a review of a book called "Portrait of the Artist as an American," he could insist that, even "as the social and moral problems of the modern world become more insistent," purely literary standards of judgment must be upheld: "criticism can be valid only if it thinks in terms of the individual work and its accomplishment or failure … and not in terms of social causes." Yet in the same year, writing about three novels of gritty, low-life realism, Trilling speaks with a very different voice—engaged, radical, ferociously political, in a way that must surprise any reader who knows only the grave and balanced style of the mature critic.

"We are living," Trilling writes, "in an environment that is befouling and insulting." In the atmosphere of the Depression, it is impossible to write affirmatively about American society: "there is only one way to accept America and that is in hate; one must be close to one's land, passionately close in some way or other, and the only way to be close to America is to hate it." This hate allows the novelist to see through the surface of American culture and perceive that "at the bottom of America there is insanity." And the best novels are those which, like Edward Dahlberg's *Bottom Dogs* and Nathan Asch's *Pay Day,* plunge the reader deepest into this insanity. For the reader who protests that this approach is not truly literary but sociological—a reader, perhaps, like the Trilling who once refused to judge art "in terms of social causes"—this new Trilling has only contempt: "The implication behind the 'sociological' sneer is that this sort of book is not 'literature,' and it illustrates admirably the blindness of 'literary' critics. Realism is perhaps never productive of great art. But America must, by the

conditions of its life, be committed to realism for a long time yet, for painful contact with environment will not soon cease, and we cannot in literature avoid the bases of our life."

It is ominous to find Trilling, of all people, putting the word literature in scare quotes—as though literature were a bourgeois conspiracy to hide the truth about capitalist society. Yet even in this essay, which represents Trilling at his most radical, it is noteworthy that he cannot quite bring himself to commit the ultimate sin against literature, which is to hold that politically effective writing equals good writing. He continues to distinguish between "realism"—by which he means, here, naturalistic protest fiction—and "great art," even though he insists, rather penitentially, that the America of 1930 doesn't deserve the latter.

This scruple never quite disappears, even as Trilling devotes himself, in the early 1930s, to the cause of the revolution. Reviewing *The Nineteen,* a propaganda novel by the Soviet writer Aleksandr Fadeyev—who would later become Stalin's chief literary enforcer—he praises it for depicting "a set of ethical and emotional values so fine that, if revolution be necessary to secure them, revolution becomes desirable." But even so, Trilling can't stop himself from writing, "so touching and so pure are the deeds and the motives in this novel that one almost distrusts it."

In a 1930 essay on D. H. Lawrence, Trilling endorses the novelist's hatred of "the sensitive middle class," writing, "the proletariat may be crippled in body; it is not further diseased by the parasite of mind." Most telling of all, perhaps, in 1933 Trilling reviews a book of Coleridge's letters, and for the first time quotes Mill's praise of Coleridge, which would become such a touchstone for him—but he quotes it in a spirit of blackest irony, in the course

of arguing that Coleridge was a fascist, "the chief transmitter" of the philosophy "which fascism, both in Italy and Germany, is now using to rationalize its fight against socialism." The poet he would later honor as the wisest of conservatives he now holds responsible for Hitler and Mussolini.

In this brief, explosive period, Trilling offers a perfect negative of what would become his life's work. In his mid-twenties, he despises the middle class, denigrates mind, and dismisses the autonomy of literature; for the rest of his career, and especially in *The Liberal Imagination,* he would write to educate the middle class, insist on the cultivation of mind, and defend the autonomy of literature. It is not hard to see that some spirit of repentance was at work, a feeling of guilt for the force and suddenness with which he had sacrificed his true self on the altar of politics. In "Art and Fortune," one of the most personal essays in *The Liberal Imagination,* Trilling writes, "To live the life of ideology with its special form of unconsciousness is to expose oneself to the risk of becoming an agent of what Kant called 'the Radical Evil,' which is 'man's inclination to corrupt the imperatives of morality so that they become a screen for the expression of self-love.'" It may seem overdramatic to say that Trilling ever participated in radical evil; but it is plain that his writing of the early 1930s was what allowed him to understand the perils of ideology from the inside. When he refers to his fellow liberals as "we," it is because he has shared their temptations, and tried to liberate himself from them.

The attempt to mediate the claims of literature and politics would be the deep purpose of Trilling's work over the next two decades. This becomes explicit in *The Liberal Imagination,* but it is equally true of the two books he produced before it: *Matthew*

Arnold, a critical biography published in 1939, and *E. M. Forster,* a short study he wrote "in a concentrated rush" in 1943. The similarities between these two subjects are striking, and suggest how, throughout his career, Trilling would be drawn to writers whom he could use as mirrors or metaphors for his own experiences. Both Arnold and Forster, after all, were liberal critics of liberalism—writers who wanted to undermine the pieties of the intellectual class to which they belonged. Both tried to vindicate literature as a social good, while preserving its imaginative independence from utilitarian pressures.

For Trilling, still struggling with his novelistic ambitions, there was also a certain significance in the fact that both Arnold and Forster were writers who stopped writing creatively. Arnold turned from poetry to criticism, while Forster didn't write another novel after *A Passage to India,* in 1924, though he lived until 1970. What Trilling says about Arnold, in the first pages of his book, reads in retrospect like a veiled confession: "He perceived in himself the poetic power, but knew that his genius was not of the greatest, that the poetic force was not irresistible in him, that it might not be able to carry before it all else in his personality. He knew he had the right power to make poetry but that it lacked something of assertiveness, that it was only delicately rooted in him." This tentativeness is surely related to the quality that Trilling, many years later, remembered drawing him to Arnold in the first place, his melancholy: "All I knew about Matthew Arnold I had derived from an affection for some of his poems whose melancholy spoke to me in an especially personal way. I thought it would be interesting to discover and explain in historical-cultural terms why he was so sad."

> Whoever seriously occupies himself with literature will soon perceive its vital connection with other agencies. Suppose a man to be ever so much convinced that literature is, as indisputably it is, a powerful agency for benefiting the world and for civilizing it, such a man cannot but see that there are many obstacles preventing what is salutary in literature from gaining general admission, and from producing due effect. Undoubtedly, literature can of itself do something towards removing these obstacles and towards making straight its own way. But it cannot do all.

Arnold's metamorphosis from poet to literary critic, and then to social critic, can thus be seen as a tale not of genius snuffed out, but of imagination tamed and made useful by conscience. Speaking of Arnold's criticism, Trilling writes, "Its keynote is activism and affirmation … Arnold sees now that he must move beyond individual psychology to what so largely determines the quality of the mind itself—to society." This is one potential solution to the bad conscience of literature, from which Trilling was suffering in the very years he was writing the doctoral dissertation that would become *Matthew Arnold.* (Indeed, he would recollect that the writing of such a book at such a time sometimes struck him as absurdly irrelevant: "it seemed to me that I was working in a lost world, that nobody wanted, or could possibly want, a book about Matthew Arnold.")

In E. M. Forster, Trilling finds a different strategy for subduing the fierce ambition of the artist. It is true that Forster, like Arnold, gave up imaginative writing at a surprisingly early stage in his career. But even in his fiction, Trilling maintained, it is possible to see Forster deliberately chastening his artistic ambition, writing out of what he called a "relaxed will." The frequent arbitrariness of

Forster's plotting (he loves to surprise the reader by casually killing of important characters), the ironic tone he favors even when dealing with serious subjects, what Trilling calls his "unbuttoned manner"—all these make it impossible to read Forster with the kind of awe due to his contemporaries Proust and Joyce.

Trilling finds Forster "sometimes irritating in his refusal to be great," and admits that "we now and then wish that the style were less comfortable and more arrogant." But it is precisely Forster's freedom from the arrogant modernist will that makes him so ethically appealing to Trilling, especially in a wartime moment when militant will has made the whole world a battleground. "Greatness in literature, even in comedy, seems to have some affinity with greatness in government and war, suggesting power, a certain sternness, a touch of the imperial and imperious," he writes. "But Forster … fears power and suspects formality as the sign of power."

In an introduction to a new edition of *E. M. Forster* written decades later, Trilling explains that in producing the book he was "benefited by the special energies that attend a polemical purpose." This reads like a covert disclaimer, a way of suggesting that with the passing of that polemical purpose, his own enthusiasm for Forster has also waned. And it is striking that the virtues he praises in Forster—casualness, modesty, indifference to power and authority—are conspicuously absent from his own writing. Two of Trilling's favorite words, in fact, are "strenuous" and "exigent," which together make a good summary of the kind of literary sensibility to which Forster is opposed.

Even while writing *E. M. Forster,* Trilling was unable fully to bridge the chasm between his own temperament and his subject's.

Appropriately, this difference is most obvious in the chapter on Forster's literary criticism, the ground on which Trilling approaches him not just as a commentator but as a rival practitioner. Writing about Forster the critic, Trilling reveals his distaste for the very qualities he has been praising in Forster the novelist. There is a "great disproportion between Forster's critical gifts and the use he makes of them," Trilling observes, and the disproportion is owed precisely to "an excessive relaxation," which prevents him from making his observations exact and his judgments thorough. The best defense Trilling can make of this "laxness" is that it is *"consciously* a contradiction of the Western tradition of intellect which believes that by making decisions, by choosing precisely, by evaluating correctly it can solve all difficulties." But Trilling cannot quite disguise, from himself or from the reader, his fundamental allegiance to the "tradition of intellect" he praises Forster for abandoning. His own writing is a continuous effort of deciding, choosing, and evaluating; the dignity and occasional pomp of his prose is the stylistic expression of this effortfulness.

The most significant result of Trilling's encounter with Arnold and Forster had less to do with their mistrust of art than with a second, related facet of their achievement: their mistrust of liberalism. If these writers were unable to commit themselves wholly to art, in the way that seems to be requisite for greatness, they were artists enough to be equally unable to commit themselves wholly to liberal dogmas about progress and equality. When Trilling writes of Arnold that "his hatred of reaction was no greater than his hatred of the Philistine liberals who, though they

too attacked the old order, betrayed the ideas of true liberalism," we hear an echo of his own predicament in the 1930s.

The second half of *Matthew Arnold* follows its subject's attempts to balance the claims of social justice against the claims of spiritual nobility, the rights of the many against the gifts of the few. To Arnold, as to most of the Victorian sages, the danger of liberal democracy was that it would drown all the high and rare human qualities in a tide of mediocrity. Trilling sees this concern even in Arnold's discussion of an apparently strictly literary matter, like the right way to translate Homer. When Arnold devoted his lectures as Oxford Professor of Poetry to attacking a new English translation of the *Iliad,* it was because the translator's failure to understand Homer's "grand style" helped to reveal "the great defect of English intellect," a lack of nobility. And as Trilling comments, "to lack in nobility is, of course, to fail utterly; it is the peculiarly modern failure; we begin to see that Arnold's lectures are not merely technical discussions—that, beginning with technique, he is moving by devious ways to a comment on modern life. He is talking about style, and whenever Arnold talks about style he is talking about society."

To say that liberalism fails because of its failure to accommodate or achieve nobility of style, however, would be to make aesthetics more important than ethics; and while some writers might be willing to make this judgment, Trilling is not. Indeed, throughout *Matthew Arnold,* he is torn between sympathy for Arnold's frankly elitist critique of liberalism, and a passionately ethical resentment of that elitism. This comes across most stridently when Trilling discusses Arnold's admiration for the French aphorist Joseph Joubert, who deplored what the 1930s

would have called "socially relevant" art: "The disasters of the times and the great scourges of life—hunger, thirst, shame, sickness and death—they can make many tales to draw many tears; but the soul whispers: 'you are hurting me.'" Joubert's preciousness evokes an outburst from Trilling that carries echoes of his early, radical essays: "the only remedies for the deficiencies of such a mind, one feels, would be the hunger, thirst, cold which he excluded from art."

The only way to resolve the deadlock between liberalism and literature would be to discover a way in which the latter actually serves the former—in which art can be considered the accomplice of justice, rather than its seductive rival. And it is this synthesis that Trilling begins to forge in *E. M. Forster,* written four years after *Matthew Arnold.* In Forster, Trilling finds another liberal whose instincts seem to be at war with liberalism: "all his novels are politically and morally tendentious and always in the liberal direction. Yet he is deeply at odds with the liberal mind, and while liberal readers can go a long way with Forster, they can seldom go all the way.... They suspect Forster is not quite playing their game; they feel he is challenging *them* as well as what they dislike. And they are right."

Just as Arnold saw the weak point of liberalism in its "style," so, Trilling writes, "for all his long commitment to the doctrines of liberalism, Forster is at war with the liberal imagination." This is the first appearance in Trilling's work of the famous phrase, and in this context it carries a straightforwardly negative charge: the liberal imagination is the failed part of liberalism. "Surely if liberalism has a single desperate weakness," he goes on to say, "it is an inadequacy of imagination: liberalism is always being

> Lawrence and E. M. Forster, of George Santayana and Aldous Huxley, of all the writers of fiction who are concerned with the question of *style* in morality.

In this way, the opposition of style and morality that had plagued Trilling since the early 1930s is resolved, in a typically dialectical fashion. Style, Arnold and Forster have taught him, is not a luxury, to be dispensed with when crisis comes; rather, style and imagination are the tools with which crisis can be mastered. It follows that the term "liberal imagination," which starts out in Trilling's work as a pejorative, can be reinterpreted, by the time of *The Liberal Imagination,* in a more ambiguous way, as the name now of an ideal, now of the reality that fails to live up to it. This doubleness is announced in the "Preface," when he declares that his goal is "to recall liberalism to its first essential imagination of variousness and possibility, which implies the awareness of complexity and difficulty." His impatience with liberalism has to do with the way it is constantly allowing its "essential imagination" to decay into a complacent failure of imagination.

This danger is implicit in every liberalism, and it is difficult to guard against. One of the charges brought against Cold War liberal anti-Communism, which was coming into its strength just at the time Trilling published *The Liberal Imagination,* is that it allowed its own defense of liberalism to become narrow, singleminded, and bellicose—that is, illiberal. The best reason to deny that Trilling was an intellectual godfather of neoconservatism is that he was aware of this danger, and took care to avoid it in his own work. The key to the lasting power of *The Liberal Imagination* is the way Trilling does not just advocate "variousness" and "complexity," but allows these virtues to structure and animate the book itself. In

this, Trilling makes an advantage out of what is often a defect in essay collections—the different perspectives, vocabularies, and occasions that make the individual parts fail to cohere into a whole. In *The Liberal Imagination,* the perpetual restatement of the liberal dilemma, always in slightly different terms, helps prevent it from ossifying into a formula.

One of the tenets of Trilling's liberalism is that the writer's individual will is, ultimately, of service to the greater good. Yet he never slights the sheer, splendid selfishness of that will, the way it makes a "large, strict, personal demand on life," as he writes in a seldom quoted but revealing essay on F. Scott Fitzgerald. The Fitzgerald of the 1920s represented just the kind of writer the liberals of the 1930s turned against—lyrical and romantic, rich and an observer of the rich. Yet Trilling insists that Fitzgerald's unguarded desire for money and fame is part of the same ardent ambition that made him "heroic": "Fitzgerald was perhaps the last notable writer to affirm the Romantic fantasy, descended from the Renaissance, of personal ambition and heroism." If you censure this kind of worldly ambition in Fitzgerald, Trilling reminds the reader, you will also have to censure Shakespeare, Dickens, and "those fabricators of the honorific 'de,' Voltaire and Balzac." What redeems the egotism of the novelist is the egolessness of the novel, which at its height, Trilling writes, is always an expression of "love." Fitzgerald's "first impulse was to love the good, and we know this the more surely because we perceive that he loved the good not only with his mind but also with his quick senses and his youthful pride and desire."

For Trilling, however, the best example of this kind of love is found in Henry James, the novelist so revered by the modernists in