

The Demonic Trilling

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Why Trilling Matters

by Adam Kirsch

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1.

It is hard to recall now the enormous prestige of Lionel Trilling as a literary and social critic during the postwar years. *The Liberal Imagination* (1950), his first collection of essays, is said to have sold more than 70,000 hardback copies. For the first and last time, a literature professor enjoyed the public eminence normally reserved for an economist like John Kenneth Galbraith or a sociologist like David Riesman. Trilling was a quietly dominating figure, sensitive, sensible, and reassuring in his emergence from 1930s radicalism and his nuanced Freudianism. His essays served as a form of national therapy. Writing about Henry James's *The Princess Casamassima*, for example, he guided readers away from the political certainties of the 1930s and toward the difficult complexities of "ambiguity and error" that they must learn to accept if they wanted to fulfill their generous liberal intentions.

For Adam Kirsch, in *Why Trilling Matters*, Trilling's authority still survives as a source of courage: "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." Kirsch's central insight, however, is that Trilling wrote with an artist's authority, not a teacher's:

Trilling's authority...is itself a literary achievement—not a privilege of cultural office or a domineering assertion of erudition and intellect, but an expression of sensibility, the record of an individual mind engaged with the world and with texts.

Trilling's constant theme, he adds, was "the conflict between the artist's will and the demands of justice."

Kirsch does not pursue the implications of these insights, but Trilling did. He broke decorum at a public ceremony by telling Robert Frost that the Frost treasured by readers as a "tutelary genius" was a myth, that the real Frost was "a terrifying poet" who portrayed "a terrifying universe" in poems warmed only by "the energy with which emptiness is perceived." Trilling's unpublished journals—Kirsch quotes only from the few, mostly innocuous, extracts that have appeared in print—make clear that he could see through the mask of the tutelary Robert Frost because he himself lived behind the mask of the tutelary Lionel Trilling.

Trilling spoke in public with the moral authority of the critic who serves society and its virtues by exposing the amoral energies of the artist who "serves his daemon and his subject." He warned against the seductive, disruptive powers of "the fierce, the assertive, the personally militant," but his greatest strength as a critic was his sense of the demonic energy that, he said, set modern art in opposition to modern culture. His first two books, *Matthew Arnold* (1939) and *E.M. Forster* (1943), glorified two English writers who suppressed their daemon by renouncing or abandoning their art.

In his private journals, however, he acknowledged the demonic impulse behind his own public career, his "character-drive to an Olympian or royal position," and his urge to reveal it: his "sense of the necessity of repudiating the character of public virtue"; "my intense disgust with my official and public self, my growing desire to repudiate it." He kept returning to the crossroads where "the academic and the men of genius and real originality" choose between forking paths. He resolved each time "to make a full attempt toward 'genius.'"¹

Trilling started out hoping to be a novelist; he finished one novel, then kept trying out ideas for others, always burdened by his "continuing sense that wickedness—or is it my notion of courage—is essential for creation." He never suppressed his impulse to creation, but concealed it behind the virtuous mask of his criticism. With their Latinate diction and Jamesian syntax, his essays announce their calm disinterested wisdom, but Trilling himself observed that "the more a writer takes pain with his work to remove from it the personal and subjective, the more...he will express his true unconscious." His prose unobtrusively refutes its ostensible commitment to enlightenment, sometimes through quick covert glimpses of chaos and darkness, sometimes through a style that ripens into ironic self-parody at its most affirming moments. "Between the university and reality there now exists the happiest, most intimate relation," he wrote in the preface to *Beyond Culture* (1965), a book that explored their mutual alienation.

No academic critic matches Trilling's power to make a nuanced synthesis of literature, culture, politics, and psychology in a single essay. Jacques Barzun, his closest academic ally, uses the word "visions" to describe

the original form that Trilling developed for putting together in one very short statement the intellectual, social and spiritual elements he had perceived. These—I will not say capsules, because that sounds mechanical, but I may call them visions—resembled in effect the rose window of a cathedral. He was so adept at creating such summaries...that once in a while I doubted some of their contents and wanted to shout, "Evidence, please!" like a heckler at a public meeting.

Trilling's best essays are in two movements. A long fugal adagio winds its way through a novel's sources and details: the moral judgments in *Emma*, the political insights of *The Princess Casamassima*. Then a brief soaring presto praises the novelist for virtues that exist only in Trilling's visions: Jane Austen as an idyllic visionary, the "perfect equilibrium" at the heart of James's "imagination of love." Equilibrium is his sole hope for escape from his inner conflict of willfulness and justice, and he ends his essay on James in an ecstatic vision of "perfect ambivalence," a love that desires nothing, that comprehends "civilized life and...transcends it." Trilling's other name for this transcendent love is "moral realism."

In practically everything he writes, Trilling invokes morality. He usually means by it a voluntary suppression of the will's impulsive wickedness, not a deliberate action toward some moral good. In public, what he valued most in books was the refuge offered by "the moral intelligence of art" against "the panic and emptiness which make their onset when the will is tired from its own excess." Diana Trilling wrote of her husband's "conscience, or perhaps I mean his stern self-prohibitions"; he thought of them as defenses, not prohibitions. "That the self may be preserved by the negation of its own energies," by negating its self-creating daemon, was the paradox at the heart of his criticism: "life is nothing unless sacrificial." In the depths of his thought, morality and self-preservation were two names for the same negation of the will.

2.

A common judgment on Trilling decrees that his humanist criticism was swept away by the theoretical revolutions of the 1960s. He opened himself to this judgment by hiding his nihilistic terrors behind the urbane moralism of his style. He never mentioned the "death of the author," but he taught himself what theoretical criticism took for granted, that the self may be an illusion projected onto the world by an impersonal, indifferent, and inescapable culture.

In his journals Trilling released the anger and pride that he excluded from his essays:

Who am I...to feel that these people are different in kind from me, and me superior? Yet feel it I do and must at this late age accept it.... To accept it in secrecy and in absolute courtesy—it really needs silence and cunning, really needs the *mask*.

Venerated as a teacher, he notes his “ever-growing dislike of teaching.” Talking with students and would-be disciples, “my mind was all rejection. Some filled me with horror.” His Columbia colleagues are at best “people of the intellect using the mind to subvert the reason,” at worst “not people but palpitating self-protections.” Kirsch is one of many writers who quote Trilling’s lament for the humanistic ideal—in which an educated person was an initiate who “became worthy of admission into the company of those who are thought to have transcended...mental darkness”—without noticing the irony in “are thought.”

Trilling’s contempt for his audience—a constant theme of his journals—is masked in his essays by his inviting use of the first-person plural. What he meant by “we” was so famously elusive that he devoted the first page of *Beyond Culture* to other people’s interpretations of the word. His statements of what “we believe” tend to be courtly euphemisms for “what you believe because you are visionless and conventional, and what I must pretend to accept for civility’s sake.”

W.H. Auden, who made selections and wrote reviews for two book clubs together with Trilling and Barzun, told friends that Trilling didn’t like literature. Auden oversimplified. “It isn’t that I don’t like literature,” Trilling once wrote,

it’s that I don’t like my relationship to literature.... I seem to be alienated from so many of the fine & complex figures of recent art and thought....

He was alienated from many other figures. “The Victorians have lost all charm for me... they bore me utterly,” he told his journal. He also noted his “loathing of the subject of Am[erican] Lit[erature].”

Whole books about Trilling go wrong by failing to perceive that when he wrote about politics he generally meant something else. “The liberal imagination” was his name for the sublimated worldview of a *bien-pensant* middle class: “In the interests...of its vision of a general enlargement of freedom and rational direction in human life...it drifts toward a denial of the emotions and the imagination.” Liberalism was the product of ideas, not imagination, and an idea is “what comes into being when two contradictory emotions are made to confront each other.” His conservative admirers, oblivious to his disdain for one-sided answers, imagined he endorsed conservatism when he explored the contradictions that provoked liberalism to its ideas. Trilling thought otherwise: “The conservative impulse and the reactionary impulse do not...express themselves in ideas but only in action or in irritable mental gestures which seek to resemble ideas.”

3.

Trilling was born in New York in 1905. His father, despite his genteel-sounding last name, was a Polish Jew who had emigrated to America. Lionel's mother was born in London; her parents were Polish Jews who had emigrated first to England, then America. His parents kept kosher but were otherwise minimally observant and celebrated both Hanukkah and Christmas. His mother read biographies and classic novels. When Lionel was six, she told him he would get his doctorate at Oxford.

Trilling went from Columbia College to Columbia Graduate School because, he said, a modern novelist needed learning. In 1927 he met Diana Rubin, the Radcliffe-educated daughter of prosperous secular Jews. Defying convention, they secretly became lovers six months before marrying in 1929. In 1930 Diana developed severe and disfiguring hyperthyroidism that required surgery, followed by disabling panic attacks and phobias that for many years required Trilling's constant attendance. In 1941 she began her writing career when Trilling recommended her to the left-wing weekly *The Nation*.

She wrote in her memoir, *The Beginning of the Journey* (1993), that she "had indeed done Lionel injury." The "phobias and the many worrisome illnesses of my young womanhood robbed him of the carefreeness of youth." After twenty years of marriage, he wrote in his journal that he and Diana were emotionally "violent beyond what anybody might guess."

Diana Trilling acquired a bad reputation that she did much to earn, but her memoir is a better book than its reviewers recognized. It portrays Trilling as depressed, blocked, and divided, but also honorable, steadfast, and courageous, untempted by the vanities of academic and literary life. Her book outraged hero-worshippers who had fantasized Trilling as a superior being, not an example of merely human bravery and endurance. One critic said he was "shocked" by her "iconoclastic drift." It was easier to worship an icon than learn from an example.

"Lionel taught me to think," she wrote. "I taught him to write." Reviewers ridiculed her claim, but it was truer than she may have known. In the unique circumstances of their marriage Trilling discovered the general themes of his criticism: "the pain and suffering that the moral life entails," his stoic refusal of "wickedness," his sense of sexuality as an escape from culture, his despair over every possible course of action—and in reaction to these, the visions of ideal equanimity that he found or invented in Austen and James. Though not in the way she imagined, he owed his career to her.

Kirsch observes that in 1930 Trilling began writing in a new tone, though he does not link the change to Trilling's recent marriage. Before this, Trilling wrote from a superior

distance. From this moment on, he was in fact often writing about the intimate antipathies of his private life when his ostensible subject was literature or culture:

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; it is the only way to love America.

Trilling's imagination was dialectical; he could not argue a point without finding arguments for its antithesis. Diana Trilling's memoir suggests that as he developed his public persona of calm equanimity, she served as his dialectical opposite by turning caustic and explosive. His essays hovered between antithetical positions—the claims of civilization, the force of instinct—while hers delivered summary judgments against writers she saw as literary offenders. As he became Socrates, she became Xantippe.

By 1936 Trilling had built a reputation as a sophisticated left-leaning reviewer, but he was stalled on his Columbia Ph.D. thesis, and some senior colleagues tried to get him dismissed from his instructorship. Their motives were a mixture of anti-Semitism, anti-Marxism, and, as he put it, their feeling that “I like to be stepped on.” He astonished them by fighting back, forcing each in turn to admit his superior merits. He kept his job, and afterward steadily accumulated honors while his sense of estrangement increased.

One “result of my successful explosion at Columbia,” he wrote in his journal, was a “feeling that I can now write with a new illumination, getting rid of that rigid linear method that has irritated me in my reviewing for so long.... Effect visible in [Eugene] O'Neill essay.” That essay² seems to have been his first to use “we” in the sense of “you but not I”: “We demand that literature be a guide to life, and when we do that we put genius into a second place, for genius assures us of nothing but itself.” Another result was the banishment of private emotions from his public image. Because he was visibly burdened by his sick wife, his colleagues had inferred that he liked to be stepped on. No one made that mistake twice.

In his twenties, Trilling was “deep in—and even contributed to—the literature of Jewish self-realization.” In his thirties he felt alienated from Jewish culture, just as he later felt alienated from bourgeois, academic, and “adversary” cultures. A whole literature thrives on the non-issue of Trilling's Jewishness. The answer he gave in 1944 to a questionnaire about his Jewish heritage is frequently quoted:

I cannot discover anything in my professional intellectual life which I can specifically trace back to my Jewish birth and rearing. I do not think of myself as a “Jewish writer.”

This sounds as if he were making what Kirsch calls a “repudiation of Jewishness,” simply because he didn't want to be a Jew. What he wrote a few paragraphs later, about the effect

of embracing Jewishness, is rarely quoted but gives a more accurate impression of his motives:

The literature of Jewish self-realization...attacked the sin of “escaping” the Jewish heritage; its effect...was to make easier the sin of “adjustment” on a wholly neurotic basis. It fostered a willingness to accept exclusion and even to intensify it,...to be provincial and parochial. It is in part accountable for the fact that the Jewish social group on its middle and wealthy levels...is now one of the most self-indulgent and self-admiring groups it is possible to imagine.

4.

Trilling’s novel, *The Middle of the Journey* (1947), is written in a calm voice recalling E.M. Forster, with interjections from D.H. Lawrence (“It was a soft destruction, almost voluptuous”). Its unsettling tension seems to be the effect of concealed double meanings that only Trilling may have noticed.

Kirsch, like everyone else, reads it as a political novel, “an important document of the intellectual climate of the 1930s.” Trilling taught that novels explore “the *actual*,” their “field of...research being always the social world.” His introduction to a 1975 reprint emphasizes his novel’s quest for reality:

From my first conception of it, my story was committed to history—it was to draw out some of the moral and intellectual implications of the powerful attraction to Communism felt by a considerable part of the American intellectual class during the Thirties and Forties.

One character, Gifford Maxim, was “more consciously derived from actuality than any of the others”: he was based on Whittaker Chambers. At the time, Chambers was not yet notorious for denouncing Alger Hiss as a Soviet spy. Trilling knew nothing about Hiss, but he had met Chambers in college and knew he had converted from a militant Communist operative to a militant Christian conservative.

A few pages after explaining that Maxim was “consciously derived” from reality, Trilling changes his tone and writes as if Maxim had instead burst from his unconscious:

Chambers had no part in my first conception and earliest drafts.... He came into the story fairly late in its development and wholly unbidden. Until he made his appearance I was not aware that there was any need for him, but when he suddenly turned up and proposed himself to my narrative, I could not fail to see how much to the point he was.

Maxim was so much to the point that he became the focus of the novel's hidden second plot, which is about Eros, not politics. Trilling's "first conception" was wholly about historical reality, but the novel he wrote is not.

The political plot is edifying and realistic. John Laskell, recuperating from scarlet fever, makes a summer visit to his left-wing friends Arthur and Nancy Croom in a Connecticut town like the one where the Trillings honeymooned. Earlier, in his New York sickroom, he had felt intense love for a rose, "a strange desire which *wanted* nothing... a love affair with non-existence...the removal of all the adverse conditions of the self." Just before he leaves for Connecticut, adverse conditions intrude themselves when Gifford Maxim returns from a long absence. He had disappeared into the Communist underground; now, having broken with the Party, he fears being murdered by his ex-comrades. He demands Laskell's help in making himself publicly visible and therefore less convenient to murder than if he stayed hidden.

The Crooms are appalled to hear that Maxim has betrayed their cause, and Laskell perceives the doctrinaire brutality concealed behind their earnest progressivism. Hostilities erupt when Maxim follows Laskell to the Crooms'. Maxim is aggressive and repulsive, but his guilt over the murders committed by his Party has the effect of shattering Laskell's "moral certainty," his "little core of safety." Maxim, unlike the Crooms, knows that justice and mercy are real. He also knows that he and they are allied despite their enmity: all three believe that truth is absolute and undivided. Laskell, who sees that truth is dialectical, rejects Maxim's deep certainties and the Crooms' shallow ones. In turn, Maxim and the Crooms feel toward Laskell "the anger of the masked will at the appearance of an idea in modulation."

The concealed erotic plot is neither edifying nor realistic. Three years earlier, Laskell loved Elizabeth Fuess, who died from pneumonia before they could marry. Maxim had been friendly with her; after her death, Laskell found "fortitude and comfort" in Maxim's "great, scarred, silent face." Maxim now erupts into Laskell's life with his phobias and aggressions, his blunt insulting style, his black-and-white morality, his terror of solitude, his demand to be noticed and served. He begins his literary career by ordering Laskell to recommend him for a job with a left-wing monthly. In short, he is the nightmare image of Diana Trilling. Lionel Trilling had fallen in love with Elizabeth Fuess and three years later found himself married to Gifford Maxim. He wrote in a note to himself about novel-writing: "I think I can depend on the unconscious process working out a series of connecting and interesting incidents."

Amid the anxieties of Maxim's visit, Laskell finds brief, illicit satisfaction with a young married woman. Having loved "non-existence," he understands his lover's "deep awareness of nullity, her knowledge of darkness." This episode, dismissed by a reviewer

as a “liberal middle-class dream of sex,” seems to echo something Diana Trilling recalled from early in their marriage, “when Lionel began to lie to me and say that he was going to the library when, in fact, he was going to the movies. I am unsure how I found this out.”

At a tense Jamesian moment, Laskell tests Nancy Croom’s morality and friendship by insisting that Maxim, through the friendship he provided at the time of Elizabeth’s death, now has an obscure “claim” on him. Nancy fails the test. She waves away the idea that Laskell’s love for Elizabeth burdens him with an obligation to Maxim. Nancy’s husband also fails the test when he asks Laskell, “Aren’t you being a little hypersubtle? A little too psychological?” Laskell knows the test was decisive:

Well, it had been done. The “claim” and Elizabeth’s death had been brought together. They had been spoken in one sentence. Never before in his life had Laskell said anything to anybody in order to see if it would produce a particular response.

Diana Trilling was annoyed when her husband, writing in these pages, called Whittaker Chambers “a man of honor.” But Trilling’s “unconscious process” had conflated her with Chambers, and his phrase was a stoic affirmation of his loyalty to both of them, despite public disapproval and his private reservations.

5.

In *E.M. Forster* Trilling wrote: “Surely if liberalism has a single desperate weakness it is an inadequacy of imagination: liberalism is always being surprised.” This was the theme, spelled out in its preface, of *The Liberal Imagination*. The fierce irony of the title still eludes readers for whom a fierce Trilling is unthinkable. Most of Trilling’s ironies went unnoticed. So many readers missed them in *Beyond Culture* that he added a note in a paperback reprint explaining them.

The essays in *The Liberal Imagination*, more than in his later books, combine gravity and grace. (Rereading them, he thought, “what genius I had then!”) “The Kinsey Report” suavely demolishes Kinsey’s understanding of sex as a biological instinct: the report never guesses that the gangster who goes to bed with a different woman every night may be driven by anxiety, not instinct; it is unaware that one partner’s satisfaction may depend on the other’s; its survey of human-animal contacts “is, oddly, the only chapter in the book which hints that sex may be touched with tenderness.” (Trilling’s wit was infrequent but sharp. Lillian Hellman, he wrote, was “a greatly underdepreciated woman.”)

“Freud and Literature,” also in *The Liberal Imagination*, demonstrates that psychoanalytic insight can illuminate literature without distorting it. A few years later, Trilling’s journals suggest, his long psychoanalysis began to illuminate him to himself, and his essays began to treat Freud as the prophet of a bleak religion of self-knowledge without hope. Freud

“made it apparent...how entirely implicated in culture we all are,” how, through a deep paradox of the self, only the drive toward death can lead to a “self beyond the reach of culture.” *Beyond Culture* was another ironic title. In the 1930s Trilling had been tempted by a Communist faith that would have obliged him to take political action. He chose instead a Freudian faith that, in his interpretation, regarded all action as neurotic and futile.

Diana Trilling’s 1993 memoir stops at 1950, seven years before an episode, visible in his journals, to which she alludes vaguely: “I could have wished him to have a thousand mistresses were this to have released him from the constraints upon him as a writer of fiction.” At the time of the episode, he wrote an essay on *Lolita*; its second movement was a hymn to a kind of love that “could not possibly exist in marriage.” His journal refers to these events as “the Great Instauration and its collapse,” apparently meaning a fruitless putting into effect of his sense that wickedness was essential for creation. The aftermath included a quietist mood (“my lack of all hope, of all desire for hope”), which reviewers mistook for conservatism and which persisted until his death in 1975, and the thickening of his later style.

His courtly mask slipped in a late essay that lampooned his students: they moved “through the terrors and mysteries of modern literature like so many Parsifals, asking no questions at the behest of wonder and fear.” He seemed to forget that students were not a culture but persons who might be dismayed to read what he thought of them. In the 1968 Columbia uprisings he proposed that only black students should be granted amnesty because “they are newcomers to our community”—as if the rebellious white students had matriculated two centuries earlier. About why they were rebellious, he said he was puzzled, but he believed the *casus belli* was “best described as a cultural issue.”

His last book, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972), is a battlefield report from the conflict between his private and public selves, in the form of a history of the “moral idioms” that art deploys to conceal and reveal personality. He ends by contrasting the demonic madness of someone who fantasizes he is Christ—a madness praised by the psychiatrist David Cooper as a doorway to truth—with the responsible sanity of the real Christ, who accepted

the inconveniences of undertaking to intercede, of being a sacrifice, of reasoning with rabbis, of making sermons, of having disciples, of going to weddings and funerals, of beginning something and at a certain point remarking that it is finished.

Trilling, as he saw it, had accepted all these “inconveniences,” interceding in campus disputes, sacrificing himself to his wife and (in her words) “to decency,” reasoning with professors, making lectures, training academic disciples, attending public functions. The last words of his book were Christ’s last words from the cross: “It is finished.” Trilling had at last united his warring “Olympian” and “sacrificial” impulses in a single straight-faced claim that his life and career had been Christlike.

A few chapters earlier he had mentioned “the peculiar bitterness of modern man, the knowledge that he is not a genius.” As in all his generalizations about what “we” know and believe, he may have made a silent, tentative exception for himself.

1 Quotations from Trilling’s journals are partly from the manuscripts at Columbia, partly from excerpts printed in *Partisan Review*, 1984 and 1985. ↵

2 *The New Republic*, September 23, 1936. ↵

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