

Why Trilling Matters, by Adam Kirsch. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011, 185 pp., \$24.00 hardbound.

Weighty Matters

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One of the many local surprises in Whit Stillman's delightful film *Metropolitan* (1990) is a running exchange between two principal characters about, believe it or not, Lionel Trilling. The two are first-year college students from different schools who meet on winter break. Audrey tells Tom that Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* is one of her favorite novels. Tom peremptorily informs her that it is really a "notoriously bad book" and cites a 1954 essay by Trilling (titled "*Mansfield Park*") in support. The exchange picks up at their next encounter:

Audrey: I read that Lionel Trilling essay you mentioned. You really like Trilling?

Tom: Yes.

Audrey: I think he's very strange. He says that nobody could like the heroine of *Mansfield Park*. I like her. Then he goes on and on about how we modern people of today with our modern attitudes bitterly resent *Mansfield Park* because its heroine is virtuous. What's wrong with a novel having a virtuous heroine?

Tom: His point is that the novel's premise, that there's something immoral in a group of young people putting on a play, is simply absurd.

Audrey: You found Fanny Price unlikable?

Tom: She sounds pretty unbearable, but I haven't read the book.

Audrey: What?

Tom: You don't have to have read a book to have an opinion on it. I haven't read the Bible either.

Audrey: What Jane Austen novels have you read?

Tom: None. I don't read novels. I prefer good literary criticism. That way you get both the novelist's ideas as well as the critic's thinking.

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There are two things to note in this exchange, after we've had a chuckle or two at Tom's breezy self-importance. One, the thrill that "good literary criticism" once provided. Even though Tom is laughably lax in reading his primary material and, furthermore, fails to understand parts of the essay in question, he is speaking out of a time when "good literary criticism" mattered, and Trilling was surely in the first rank of critics who preeminently made it matter. Following the example of Matthew Arnold and, later, T.S. Eliot, twentieth-century literary criticism in English reached a very high level of cogency and vitality, with figures such as Trilling, F.R. Leavis, Randall Jarrell, and others, and, in another vein, with the New Critics such as Cleanth Brooks and Allen Tate. These men wrote of literature as a subject of vital importance—not escapism, entertainment, academic game playing, or politics by other means—but intricately connected to how we choose to live our lives and how we relate to society. Thanks to this legacy of seriousness, the study and criticism of literature could launch one into the currents of intellectual thought and debate and, indeed, sometimes a critical controversy could be as interesting as, if not more interesting than, the literature itself.

The second thing to note about this exchange is Audrey's puzzlement

at Trilling's finding Fanny Price so completely unlikable—"Nobody, I believe," Trilling pronounces in the essay, "has ever found it possible to like the heroine of *Mansfield Park*."¹ But like Audrey, many of us *have* found her likable, even lovable, not to mention admirable in her patience, kindness, and surprising strength when challenged or ordered to do something contrary to her own best judgment.

As for the assessment Tom parrots from Trilling—"the novel's premise, that there's something immoral in a group of young people putting on a play, is simply absurd"—that same premise is realized aesthetically in the book, as some of the unsupervised young people go badly wrong in enacting the racy drama they have chosen and indulging in the opportunity it gives them to loosen normal restraints. And, it must be said, although Trilling does find the premise absurd, he goes on to give a brilliant exegesis of how it works in the novel. Despite that, however, he holds to his negative judgment of Fanny.

In the short, useful book under review, one of a series from Yale University Press on why various mid-twentieth-century figures still

¹Lionel Trilling, "Mansfield Park," in *The Moral Obligation to Be Intelligent: Selected Essays*, ed. Leon Wieseltier (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 296.

matter in contemporary culture (to date, the series also includes Hannah Arendt and Reinhold Neibuhr), *New Republic* senior editor Adam Kirsch makes his careful way through Trilling's oeuvre, his early monographs on Matthew Arnold (1939) and E.M. Forster (1943), his novel, *In the Middle of the Journey* (1947), and most importantly, his collections of essays, *The Liberal Imagination* (1950), *The Opposing Self* (1955), *Beyond Culture* (1965), and *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1971). Kirsch also discusses *The Experience of Literature* (1967), an anthology Trilling edited for college students, and references two posthumous collections of essays, *The Last Decade* (1979) and *Speaking of Literature and Society* (1980). Trilling died in 1975 at the age of seventy.

Once he had outgrown his earlier Marxist utopian sympathies Trilling was rightly repelled at the idea of packaging literature—and life—in service of a progressive vision, as in the proletarian novels of the thirties and forties. In “Manners, Morals, and the Novel” (1947), Trilling makes one of his most astute and often quoted pronouncements concerning the Communist fellow travelers of that time (justifiably cited of today's Left as well): “Some paradox of our natures lead us, when once we have made our fellow men

the objects of our enlightened interest, to go on to make them objects of our pity, then of our wisdom, ultimately of our coercion.”²

Against the straightened, limited, and ultimately coercive ideal of the good characteristic of leftist thinking, Trilling wished, in another oft-quoted phrase, “to recall liberalism to its first essential imagination of variousness and possibility, which implies the awareness of complexity and difficulty,” as he explains in the preface to *The Liberal Imagination*.³

Kirsch notes in *Why Trilling Matters*, however, that the author “came of age in a climate of triumphant modernism, when America was undergoing a liberating Renaissance,” one in which he wished to share as an intellectual and critic.⁴ The effort to maintain openness in the face of the modernist challenge to tradition would often bring Trilling into the conflict that arises between “the energies of art and the disciplines of civilization,” as Kirsch puts it (32). Modern literature, he explains, is characterized by “the idea that what we call evil is actually good:

²Lionel Trilling, “Manners, Morals, and the Novel,” in *Moral Obligation*, 118.

³Lionel Trilling, “Preface to *The Liberal Imagination*,” in *Moral Obligation*, 548.

⁴Adam Kirsch, *Why Trilling Matters* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 44. Further references to this work will be cited parenthetically within the text.

that the primal is superior to the civilized, passion superior to reason" (105).

Attempting to remain true to his refusal to prepackage life and literature in expected ways, and to remain open to the "variousness and possibility" that modernism presented, Trilling tended to sympathize more with its subversive elements than to draw any traditionally moral boundaries against its encroachments. Instances of this can be found throughout his work, but it comes to light most clearly in his essay "On the Teaching of Modern Literature" (1961, collected in *Beyond Culture*).

In a virtual "canonization" of the "primal" and "nonethical," as Trilling sees it, modern literature seeks liberation not just from middle-class life but from society itself, and even more "from our human condition," as he phrases it in *The Experience of Literature*.⁵ Further, Trilling is open about his own agreement with the harsh and disparaging view of ordinary existence that he maintained modern literature repudiated—of "the dullness, the passivity, the acquiescence in which we live most of our lives,"⁶

again, from *The Experience of Literature*, and "of the awful boredom and slow corruption of respectable life" that is depicted by such writers as André Gide.⁷ When Trilling observes in modern literature a "bitter line of hostility to civilization itself," he does not flinch from elaborating in detail: "its order achieved at the cost of extravagant personal repression, either that of coercion or that of acquiescence; its repose otiose; its tolerance either flaccid or capricious; its material comfort corrupt and corrupting; its taste a manifestation either of timidity or of pride; its rationality attained only at the price of energy and passion."⁸

In a particularly startling, even puzzling passage in this essay, Trilling relishes the suggestion in modern literature "of losing oneself to the point of self-destruction, of surrendering oneself to experience without regard to self-interest or conventional morality, of escaping wholly from the societal bonds," as a temptation to a certain kind of fulfillment.⁹

Thus, in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Trilling calls the station agent Kurtz—who undergoes a

⁵Lionel Trilling, *The Experience of Literature: A Reader with Commentaries* (New York: Holt, Reinhart, and Winston, 1967), 326.

⁶Ibid., 327.

⁷Lionel Trilling, "On the Teaching of Modern Literature," in *Moral Obligation*, 385.

⁸Ibid., 381, 391.

⁹Ibid., 401.

complete physical and moral collapse in the African wilderness, pillaging, murdering, and allowing himself to be worshipped as a god by the natives—"a hero of the spirit."¹⁰ In Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, an aging writer conceives a longing for a beautiful young boy, which causes him to abandon all caution. Garishly made up to look more youthful, at the end he expires on a public beach in a rush of desire, "overcome by a passion that his ethical reason condemns." Trilling insists that "we do not take this to be a defeat, rather a kind of terrible rebirth: at his latter end the artist knows a reality that he had until now refused to admit to consciousness."¹¹

The essay on *Mansfield Park* was written some years before "On the Teaching of Modern Literature," but it's along these lines that we might place Trilling's disdain for Fanny Price. Since so much of the modern sensibility has been cultivated to favor the rebel, the subversive, the outcast, the stranger, the voluptuary, the sensualist, the anti-hero in general as it came to be called, such a traditionally virtuous and unironically presented heroine as Fanny Price can look to a modern reader to be not good, but

goody-goody, "overtly virtuous and consciously virtuous," as Trilling puts it. For, he asserts, "We [moderns] think that virtue is not interesting."¹²

So far does Trilling go in his effort to maintain "openness and possibility," that he ignores the moderating elements of the very works he adduces in his teaching essay. Is Kurtz a "hero of the spirit," or is he, as the novel's narrator eventually sums him up, "hollow at the core"? Is Aschenbach's death a "terrible rebirth" or utterly ignominious and even cautionary? And Gide's "immoralist" escapes the "awful boredom...of respectable life" only to sink to the point of self-obliteration.

Trilling includes *Civilization and Its Discontents* on his course syllabus, but he does not in this context (although he does elsewhere) accept Freud's articulation of the tragic nature of the human condition. "[F]ewer and fewer people," he writes, "wish to say with Freud that the loss of instinctual gratification, emotional freedom, or love is compensated for...by the security of civilized life."¹³

But if one rejects Freud's conclusion, then the likely result is to react as did some of Trilling's students—much to his surprise and

¹⁰Ibid., 393–94.

¹¹Ibid., 395.

¹²Trilling, "Mansfield Park," 296.

¹³Trilling, "On Modern Literature," 396.

dismay—who “wholly contained the attack” of modernism.¹⁴ Instead of being properly shocked by it, they blandly accepted, processed, and homogenized it. Since one cannot continue long in an attitude of shock and outrage with no moral anchor to counter its pull, eventually “the socialization of the antisocial,” as Trilling terms it, “the acculturation of the anti-cultural, the legitimization of the subversive,” will take place.¹⁵

Alternatively, Kirsch observes, “Trilling did believe that mature and ethical disillusionment was superior to a naïve intoxication with transcendence,” and he details some of Trilling’s forays in that direction, but one has to agree that this “was a belief he embraced with effort and never unreservedly” (121, 130–31).

Trilling’s stance toward modern literature is to some extent understandable. At one time modernism’s forays into the extremes, the explicit, the irrational, the violent, seemed to promise a franker, more honest, less sentimental portrayal of human life. And, after all, it was the liberal sensibility—the limited liberal imagination that Trilling wrote of and criticized—that tended to

portray a sanitized view of existence in which certain left-wing ideals would prevail. The modernist writers on Trilling’s syllabus (which also included Proust, Kafka, Yeats, Joyce, Lawrence, and Eliot), many politically more conservative, with their willingness to explore the dark side, were bringing us uncomfortable truths about human nature and its resistance to simplistic ideas of human flourishing.

Furthermore, modernism demanded a kind of aesthetic autonomy in which the work of art was to be evaluated on its own terms and apart from traditional moral considerations. This approach had its uses in confronting complex new works, which often had no clear moral center, but led to a kind of sacralization of the aesthetic that became more problematic as the arts became more deliberately shocking, violative, and transgressive.

Eventually, surrender to experience—the relinquishment of reason and caution in pursuit of sensation with no guide higher than the self—yielded not so much salvation as saturation, satiety, surfeit. The “canonization” of the “primal” and “nonethical” accelerated through the twentieth century to the point where mindless violence and casual perversity came to permeate the culture, the arts, popular entertainment, and even

¹⁴Ibid., 398.

¹⁵Ibid.

advertising, a development to which the moral agnosticism cultivated in modernism was surely a contributing factor.

Trilling intimated as much in a diary entry that Kirsch cites in which he expressed reservations at the efficacy of works of art that depict the extremes of experience. “[T]here is truth in the belief that we become assimilated to the literal contents of the art we contemplate,” Trilling wrote in 1948: “It is possible that our contemplation of cruelty will not make us humane but cruel, that the reiteration of the badness of our spiritual condition will make us consent to it” (132). But this kind of suggestion did not come in for any serious consideration in his published writings.

Be that as it may, the quasi-religious idolization of literature effected by modernism (dramatized, for example, by Simon Gray, a former student of F.R. Leavis, in *The Common Pursuit*), was due for a correction, but it came in unwelcome form. Susan Sontag argued for a less serious approach to criticism—an “erotics of art,” as she termed it. Kirsch’s description of the new sensibility ends with Sontag, but we know what soon followed. A resurgent Left advanced in a wave of “postmodern” approaches whose proponents denied the existence of truth and with it any privileged status to

literature altogether, proceeding to attack and dissect it with updated versions of the left-wing progressivism that Trilling had earlier repudiated, only now in more barbaric form. They denounced literature as being little more than an outgrowth of historical prejudice, replete with sexism, racism, classism, and the like, which became the new cardinal sins replacing the old.

Not all of this was in full bloom in the early seventies, but enough of it was for Trilling to address it in the first Jefferson Lecture in 1972. In his address, “Mind in the Modern World,” Trilling cautioned against two aspects of the academic assault brewing at that time: the denial of objectivity as an achievable goal of the rational intellect, and the damage being wrought on intellectual standards and liberal education by affirmative action. On other aspects of the academic and literary counterculture, however, Trilling remained more or less silent, nor did he return to the objections to the new sensibility that he made in the Jefferson Lecture. Kirsch finds admirable Trilling’s eschewal of what came to be called “the culture wars”—which Kirsch in any event believes are at an end—in lieu of staying true to his project of “readerly heroism,” of self-creation/realization through critical encounters with literature. This is for Kirsch why Trilling ultimately “matters,” that is,

he continued to live according to the disciplines of literature even in an unliterary age.

But if it is true that Trilling defined himself through criticism, I would maintain that he missed composing a key chapter. The sections of the Jefferson Lecture addressing the contemporary assault on mind, rationality, classical liberalism, and the life of the university are among the best things Trilling ever wrote. His explanatory power, both magisterial and exquisitely precise, is on display as he rises to a direct challenge of all he held dear. This might have made him “matter” even more today than the hermetic style of criticism for which Kirsch praises him, and which, although full of marvelous insight, can sometimes be rather opaque and diffuse, even after Kirsch’s own heroic efforts at explication.¹⁶

Furthermore, the culture wars are not “passing into history,” but more crucial than ever, as the deterioration of academic and literary standards due to the onslaught of the new barbarisms seems more and more reflected in the society at large. And the odd thing is, despite his openness to the

most subversive elements in literature, his insistence on “variousness and possibility,” Trilling was seen in the new dispensation as “a suffocating ghost,” as Kirsch characterizes the view, a dominant literary critical presence that symbolized everything the counterculture wanted to overthrow (8). Trilling’s overall approach, his general tone, the very seriousness with which he considered things and approached his teaching, the very fact that he carefully articulated what was at stake, the connections he made between literature and life as well as the importance he placed on his students’ reactions was evidently too weighty, too judicious, not frivolous enough to support the anything-goes, truth-is-what-I-say-it-is mentality of the literary Left. As Gertrude Himmelfarb observes, despite Trilling’s dismay at his students’ bland reactions to modernism, they “were at least reading those books and confronting those ideas.”¹⁷ Contrast Louis Menand, who took the occasion of a new edition of *The Liberal Imagination* in 2008 to cheer with smug complacency and self-satisfied superiority the passage of “the age of heroic criticism,” to put down Trilling’s entire career, and to

¹⁶For further discussion of Trilling and the culture wars, see my article, “Lionel Trilling and the Barbarians at the Gate,” *Academic Questions* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2001–02): 7–17.

¹⁷Gertrude Himmelfarb, “On Looking into the Abyss,” in *On Looking into the Abyss: Untimely Thoughts on Culture and Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 6.

present the new nihilism with gleeful abandon.

Nowadays, he informs his *New Yorker* readers, “Most people don’t use the language of approval and disapproval in their responses to art; they use the language of entertainment. They enjoy some things and don’t enjoy other things....This seemed to me to give literary criticism a lot less moral work to do.”¹⁸ Regarding the importance to Trilling of what he called the “dark and bloody crossroads where literature and politics meet”¹⁹—and for Trilling politics meant culture, society, manners, morals, “imagination and mind”—Menand sees no further value in this kind of critical effort: “If there are bloody crossroads out there calling for the attention of the critical intellect, the novel does not appear to run through them.”²⁰

Many might agree that literature no longer seems to matter as it once did, but would see the reason for this in the leveling of standards in the name of group equality and identity politics, and the forsaking of critical judgment to glorify mediocrity and downgrade excellence, all of which helped turn the novel, what D.H. Lawrence saw as the “bright book of life,” into a consumer item.²¹

Even the brief, amusing colloquy between Audrey and Tom in *Metropolitan*, with its mention of the heavy water concept of virtue, might be too much for today’s literary luftmenschen, but in its own comic way it does offer a glimpse into the connections between literature and life that criticism from the heroic age might prompt in readers, and the kind of discussion “good literary criticism” will always inspire.

¹⁸Louis Menand, “Regrets Only,” *New Yorker*, September 8, 2008, http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2008/09/29/080929crat_atlarge_menand.

¹⁹Lionel Trilling, “Reality in America,” in *Moral Obligation*, 77.

²⁰Menand, “Regrets Only.”

²¹For more on Menand, see John Ellis, “Cheerleading a Crumbling Academy,” a review of *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University*,” in the Fall 2010 *Academic Questions*. Ellis explains why Menand’s latest “book is so rambling and half-hearted, and why his one attempt to get specific is a disaster.”