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LIONEL TRILLING: MODERN LITERATURE AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Teachers of literature are sometimes faced with the not always rewarding task of describing, in advance, the courses they intend to offer: "This course will attempt to. . . ." There is a dreary, prefabricated structure to these efforts that usually appear on departmental bulletin-boards prior to the start of a new semester. One generally follows the statement of the "aim of the course" with an all-too-expected account of how the chosen texts will realize it. We do not normally expect of these summaries that they will blossom into major critical essays.

I don't know if Lionel Trilling's major critical essay, "On The Teaching of Modern Literature", began as a one-page announcement on a Columbia bulletin-board. If it did, it must have made interesting reading, for this essay, with its statement of the aims of the course and the rationale behind the choice of texts, fully deserves its place at the head of a collection of essays that evokes, by its title, *Beyond Culture*, two of Freud's boldest critical works. Quite simply, Trilling argues that his course was intended to demonstrate an element in modern literature that may well invalidate the enterprise of offering courses in this literature. Trilling's essay first appeared in *Partisan Review* in 1961, but I do not think that its "age" should keep us from giving it the consideration it still deserves as a major pedagogical and critical statement by one of the most compelling voices of modern literary criticism. One should also keep in mind that at the time Trilling first published his essay the movement he characterized as "modern" had, by and large, ceased to be a contemporary movement. We should not, however, take those early stages in the absorption of modernism into the past as a sign that Trilling's essay is an anachronism or that the concerns of what he calls modern literature are no longer our own.

Anyone who has assumed that there is a self-evident need in the university for the study of modern literature should be given pause by Trilling's self-conscious defense of his own course. He does not raise the trite argument that we are too close to Joyce, Lawrence, Mann, Yeats, and Kafka to be able to teach them "objectively". Indeed, an "objective" appraisal of their work may be all too possible as well as inimical to that work. Trilling prefers to argue on much more difficult ground his feeling that the great writers of "modernism" are poorly served by our eagerness to teach their work. He finds it ironic that in the university, the citadel of civilized consciousness, there should be taught a literature that is defined by "the bitter hostility to civilization which runs through it".¹ He is struck by something grotesque in this "socialization of the anti-social . . . acculturation of the anticultural . . . legitimization of the subversive" (26) that he thinks may come of our efforts to adapt the masterworks of modernism to the demands of the academy.²

Trilling was not happy to see such a course added to the Columbia curriculum. It was offered in answer to a demand of students that the curriculum make modern writing available to them, and the nervous professor, determined in good Calvinist fashion that the students work for their pleasure, decided to include in the course certain books that he thought of as prolegomena to the study of the modern movement. *The Golden Bough*, *The Birth of Tragedy* and *The Genealogy of Morals*, *Notes From Underground*, *Civilization and Its Discontents* — these and other key studies in the irrational would supply the background for the classroom study of that revolt against civilization that is, for Trilling, the distinctively *modern* element in literature.

What is to be thought of the dilemma that Trilling poses? It is not enough to say, smugly, that this is all very "academic" and that nothing we now say can alter the fact that modern literature is a staple of the university curriculum. Trilling's point is still to be met: are we, by teaching these writers, "co-opting" them, making them part of a venture that they opposed with all the force of their genius? Should we, perhaps, skip this embarrassing period of literary history altogether and leave an ominously suggestive gap in the curriculum between, say, Meredith and later writers who are more "tolerant" of civilization, in the hope that this lacuna will leave intact the destructive power of a literary tradition that Trilling compares to a howitzer? But, God

knows, the later writers might have been infected with the modernist malaise, and how can we who have read Frazer, Freud, Nietzsche, *et al.*, ever again read Aeschylus, Milton, and Dickens "innocently". If civilization must always be *unbehaglich*, as Freud argued, then those early masters must have *suffered* the condition that a D. H. Lawrence, according to Trilling, made the *object* of his rage. Or is Trilling wrong in his claims about modern literature and its great theme?

Trilling's essay arose out of his feeling of distress at the "outrage" he had conspired to "perpetrate upon a great literature" (27). He was bothered at the thought of the great modern writers at the mercy of academic institutions:

'Compare Yeats, Gide, Lawrence, and Eliot in the use which they make of the theme of sexuality to criticize the deficiencies of modern culture. Support your statement by specific references to the work of each author.(Time: one hour.)' And the distressing thing about our examination questions is that they are not ridiculous, they make perfectly good sense — such good sense that the young person who answers them can never again know the force and terror of what has been communicated to him by the works he is being examined on (12).

Trilling is not, presumably, so responsible for this "crime" as those who are eager to take on the challenge of teaching these authors whose names, in our test questions, make it appear that we are parodying our professional idiom. After all, the students at Columbia sought out a dean, and "there was no argument that could stand against this expressed desire: we could only capitulate, and then, with pretty good grace, muster the arguments that justified our doing so" (6-7).³ Be that as it may, my own position is that the Columbia students were justified in their demand, regardless of whether Lawrence might have winced (or worse) to see his sexual ethic become the object of academic discourse, that worst form of "sex in the head". One wonders why these tears are being shed only over the fate of the "moderns". Surely it is jarring to think back over all those dreary topics we have assigned to our students for essays on *King Lear* or *The Prelude*. Perhaps, in all logic, we should abandon the entire enterprise of teaching literature.

But Trilling's point is more complex than this, for he argues that "no literature has ever been so shockingly personal as that of our time — it asks every question that is forbidden in polite society. It asks us if we are content with our marriages, with our family lives, with our professional lives, with our friends" (8). It is a literature, he argues, that

asks us if we are "content with ourselves", and his fear is that university study "tends to accelerate the process by which the radical and subversive work becomes the classic work" (11). The very "vivacity" of the modern response to its literature transfigures the anti-cultural into one more manifestation of the cultural. I cannot help but think that in Trilling's fear for modern writing there is a certain patronization of all previous writing, a curiously genteel narrowness (*Forbidden Questions*), and a lack of historical feeling for the very literature that he is intent on defending.

No doubt but that modern literature raises personal questions in an urgent and shocking manner. This need not, however, be taken to imply that *King Lear* or *Great Expectations*, for example, do not ask forbidden questions. Of course they do, but they are not such self-consciously personal questions as those raised in *L'Immoraliste* or *Women in Love*. Writers love to shock the bourgeoisie. They have been doing so since before modernism, since, that is, they lost their feeling of identity with the class that they then set out to shock. As for earlier works, such as those I have mentioned, if they do not ask us whether we are content with our marriages, our professional lives, our friends, indeed, with ourselves, then what is it about them that we find so moving? Do they ask "impersonal" questions that succeed, somehow, in moving us in our persons? Are we not put in question when we read of Lear, Pip, Emma Bovary, or Julien Sorel? Do Pope and Molière leave us "content with ourselves"?

I doubt it. I think Trilling has taken modern concern with sexuality as though the sexual were the privileged place of the personal and the shocking. One may also wonder if the modern writer's concern with sexuality necessarily implies a commitment to that irrational dimension of the self that is denied by the thrust of civilization. Trilling several times cites Lawrence as an example of the kind of writer he has in mind when he defines the modern spirit's restlessness with a "long excess of civilization":

. . . 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 (17).

This is certainly accurate when applied to Lawrence, *if* one is careful to keep in mind that Lawrence is attacking *a* civilization and not the thing in - itself. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is not an attack on civilization but on a certain society at a certain time. The element of the "anti-cultural" is not to be found in Lawrence but in that society itself, defined as it was by the relics of nineteenth-century ideals (industrialism, mechanism) and the banality of our own century's early reaction to Victorian sexual hypocrisy. Lawrence wanted a better civilization. Recall Birkin's nostalgia, in *Women in Love*, for "Jane Austen's England", or Lawrence's own restless pursuit of old and new forms of social order, in such books as *Etruscan Places*, *Mornings in Mexico*, and even in that *bête noire* of the liberal imagination, *The Plumed Serpent*. Lawrence's work represented an attempt to imagine a civilization in which sexuality need not be the source of "discontent", and it should be compared to such recent efforts to resolve the conflicting demands of social order and sexuality as Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*. I will return to this matter later.

But let us consider Trilling's essay on its own terms. For the sake of the argument, let us suppose that such very different men as Lawrence, Gide, Mann, and Yeats, men from different societies and different families, were all united by a spirit of uneasiness with the idea of civilization. Let us agree with Trilling that to ask students to read them is to ask that they "look into the Abyss" (27). He is fond of quoting Keats' remark that poetry is "not so fine a thing as philosophy — For the same reason that an eagle is not so fine a thing as a truth" (29). Trilling, still worrying about the effect of modern literature on the "young person", quotes Keats to warn the teacher that in our culture literature is often supposed to convey "more truth than any other intellectual activity". Sensitive young people will likely *believe* the modern prophets of the irrational.

But Trilling seems himself to believe that modern "poetry", at least, is offering us a truth — why else would he fear for its fate at the hands of civilized institutions? Trilling takes the theme he finds in modernism at face value and *assumes* that it is worthy of our respect. If, however, the modern eagle flies on wings of truth, then surely those of us who behold its flight and desire to see it fly on un-fettered are duty-bound, as lovers of truth, to heed its message and to abandon their academic calling. Perhaps we too can grow wings!

How can we fear for these modern eagles and remain committed to the clerisy that, if Trilling is correct, they must have loathed? Our profession is to *teach*, and as Trilling points out there is something "odd" about teaching books that attack civilization (and, of course, teaching those old books that have contributed to the "long excess of civilization"). There may be another implication to Keats' comment and the nature of reading may be such that we can accept its soaring ethic in our imaginations, while pursuing business as usual when we put aside our cherished texts. The "mere touch of cold philosophy" may make such compromises more difficult to effect.

In his poorer students, terrified and resentful of the bad tidings brought to them by his syllabus, Trilling sees the "Old People", and he knows their thoughts:

'Why do you harry us? Leave us alone. We are not Modern Man. We are the Old People. Ours is the Old Faith. We serve the little Old Gods, the gods of the copybook maxims, the small, dark, somewhat powerful deities of lawyers, doctors, engineers, accountants. With them is neither sensibility nor *angst*' (26).

To worship in the imagination the great and powerful Dark Gods of Modernism, while remaining in reality one of their enemies (a Professor) is, I suggest, to be oneself one of the Old People. The professors may have Jamesian sensibilities leavened by Sartrean *angoisse*, but if, by their profession, they constitute a threat to the new gods, they may be said to worship the same deities as do the accountants and the lawyers. Unless it be, of course, that these terrible Dark Gods are also illusions and their ethic false. It may be that Trilling responds to that ethic as he does to the soar of a mere eagle: his eyes glancing heavenward, his feet planted on the *terra firma* of civilization.

Trilling is afraid that if we allow the rough beasts of modernism to slouch into our classrooms we will necessarily abort the era to which they intend to give birth. But why limit this anxiety to the effects of the classroom? If we fear that civilized institutions may blight modern literature, we should also refrain from speaking of that literature in, for example, the faculty club, to our eminently perceptive colleagues. In fact, if we accept Trilling's argument and try to draw from it the full measure of implication, it becomes difficult to know just what we are to "do" with these writers if we wish to be fair to their subversive intentions. To read them well, with the taste and discrimination that

come of years of reading, teaching, and writing about the best that has been thought and said is to risk coating these modern texts with a film of civilization. Trilling seems to have chosen the easier target by fixing his sights on the classroom. I should think that Lawrence and Gide might be less disturbed by the dialectic of the classroom exchange than by the well-turned phrases of the critical essay. It might be better to risk the ignorance of the Old People than the understanding of the literate. In *our* rage at the resistance of the Old People to the message of modernism, we might even wish disaster on them and on the society that their efforts sustain, including that civilized "super-structure" wherein we make our own living.

If Trilling's judgment about modern literature be correct, there is no way of talking about that literature (including Trilling's essay) that does not do it a disservice. The writers themselves are caught in the same trap, for they write, in novels, plays, and poems (the instruments of civilized discourse), of their "disenchantment . . . with culture itself" (3). To risk using a word that Trilling seems not to like, the only "authentic" response to the modern critique of culture would be that of silence. Logically, the writers themselves should have kept silent.

There may, however, be a less extreme position that one can take on this problem. In that paradox of a cultural attack on culture, there may be a handhold, however shaky, that Trilling has overlooked. To co-opt is to choose to co-opt. It is to accept a determinism of institutions as anachronistic as the determinism of which Laplace once spoke, and it is to take these writers and to teach them in a spirit that is alien to the spirit in which they wrote. This may involve no more than, for example, a tone of weary and all-knowing elegance, a pedagogical *survol* that is devoid of the rage that moved, according to Trilling, the luminaries of modernism. If one wishes not to co-opt them, one must accept the contradiction that they accepted by writing, and, in one's teaching, one must co-operate with them: the teacher as a fifth-column in support of the howitzers of modernism!

Trilling's position is, however, inconsistent in a more intriguing way, and it suggests that there is some doubt in his mind about the scope of his claim for modern literature. In the concluding paragraph of his essay, he refers to Mann's claim that "all his work could be understood as an effort to free himself from the middle class, and this, of course, will serve to describe the chief intention of all modern literature" (30).

We return now to a point I made earlier. How odd that the middle class comes to stand, suddenly, for civilization itself. Recall the first paragraph:

I propose to consider here a particular theme of modern literature which appears so frequently and with so much authority that it may be said to constitute one of the shaping and controlling ideas of our epoch. I can identify it by calling it the disenchantment of our culture with culture itself — it seems to me that the characteristic element of modern literature, or at least of the most highly developed modern literature, is the bitter line of hostility to civilization which runs through it (3).

Are we now to understand that the “characteristic element of modern literature” is not the “chief intention of all modern literature”? It would be to reason most curiously. It is interesting also that in this final paragraph Trilling suddenly disclaims any intention of questioning “the propriety of expressing the commitment [to an admiration of modern literature] in the college classroom.” However, he adds, parenthetically, that “it does seem odd!” (30).

And yet Trilling has located what may be the nub of the problem, at least for some of the authors he cites. Mann may have believed that to free oneself from the middle class and its cultural bonds was to free oneself from culture, but D. H. Lawrence was not so naive (nor, I think, was Mann). Beyond the principles of middle class life, he did not see a nightmarish Dionysian spirit that would destroy us and civilization as well. There were, for Lawrence, other classes (workers and even aristocrats) who possessed other energies than those that moved the beastly bourgeoisie; and he sought to salvage those energies from the tangle that he found in these other cultural orders. Lawrence’s dark gods were not offered as bacilli to infect and destroy civilization. If anything they were to immunize us against the plague that he saw infecting civilization. A similar objection can be made to Trilling’s belief that Gide’s concern with the “supreme right of the individual” places the teacher in the difficult position of having to pay his “*devoirs* to morality” without making Gide’s point “merely historical, academic” (9). Gide’s “point” is not that morality must be abandoned but that the boredom of living a “bourgeois death”, to use a phrase of Sartre’s, is not moral. To Trilling’s view of morality as an eternal given to which duty is owing, I prefer the view of Lawrence that “morality is a delicate act of adjustment on the soul’s part, not a rule or prescription.”

What I am arguing is that Trilling has made of "modern literature" an abstraction lacking in all historical specificity. This is apart from whatever problems we may find with the essay if we try to take it on its own terms. He offers no idea of what social forces molded modern literature nor of what intellectual pressures that literature reflected. Why, in the early part of this century, is there this concern in the work of men born in the previous century with the irrational and the "uncivilized"? It is the point I made earlier when speaking of Lawrence's attack on the nineteenth century. Are we to believe that the discontent of civilized life had become suddenly unbearable (as George Steiner seems, at times, to suggest) and that literature had become a manifestation of a general uneasiness with civilization, an uneasiness that, at last, ran amok at Verdun, Hiroshima, and Maidanek? Trilling's argument, however, is of a nature that to raise such questions about modernism makes the questioner appear as a symptom of the illness that Trilling's modern writers wished to cure.

I do not think that modern literature is moved by the impulse that Trilling finds in it. His argument does not account for other modern writers: Williams, Stevens, Faulkner, and Sartre, to name a few. Perhaps he would not call their work "the most highly developed" examples of modern literature. Needless to say, there is here, in addition to a matter of critical judgment, a matter of logic. But then I don't think his argument is accurate with respect to the writers he chooses to emphasize. A concern with the irrational, the demonic, and the barbaric is not necessarily a celebration of them. Conversely, the celebration of such forces may proceed from the belief that a given form of "rationality" has become a parasite to its host civilization, and that to drive it from this culture on which it preys, may require that we summon the aid of a spirit that is chthonian. One recalls the motto given by Freud, a man in whom some once saw a threat to civilization, to his book on the dream: "*Flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo.*"

There is, as Trilling notes, a great gloom over modern literature. He warns us to beware of what he calls "modern self-pity", the feeling that we live in an especially dark age and the delight we take in works that reflect the darkness to us. He seems, however, to enjoy, or, at least, to accept the justice of, modernism's "horror stories". We may wonder if the modern relish for pessimistic literature is not in some way

analogous to the sentimental response of the luminaries of the Victorian intelligentsia to *The Old Curiosity Shop*, and that perhaps it is Beckett who offers us our Little Nells. More importantly, the "abyss" that Trilling says is revealed to us by our literature is actually multiple. The abyss that gapes in "The Waste Land" is not the same as that seen by Lawrence. The despair of Sartre's Roquentin is not of the same order as that of Joseph K. What does seem to have occurred in "our epoch" is a loss of confidence in the standards and norms held up to us for twenty-five centuries by Western Civilization.

Trilling is right to ask his students to read Nietzsche and Freud, for they argued that morality did not come to us from the sky. The *angst* that defines so much of modern writing is, among other things, a recognition that, as Sartre's Goetz says, there is "No more Heaven, no more Hell; nothing but earth." *Nothing* stops Kurtz from relapsing into barbarism in that story of Conrad that Trilling sees as a pivotal modern test. One invents one's civilization, as Marlowe may recognize. But Trilling takes this loss of confidence in received norms as a sign of hostility towards the enterprise of forging new norms. The rage against the middle class that marks the work of Lawrence, Mann, Gide, and Sartre is a rage against the false hope it holds out to us that we can still live as though our lives were not in question and were still sustained by unbroken Tablets of Law.⁴ It is, however, simply a *non sequitur* to take that rage against the limited vision of a class as evidence of a wholesale disenchantment with culture itself.

By limiting his essay to an unhistorical contrast of Civilization to its Other, all Trilling has left us with is a feeling that, somehow, we of the twentieth century have reached the summit of civilization. There, at its pinnacle, we have had to pay the price of our eminence and to experience the literary storms of discontent that make us look back and yearn for the dark place whence we had started our climb.

FOOTNOTES

1. Lionel Trilling, "On The Teaching of Modern Literature", *Beyond Culture* (New York, 1965), p. 3. Subsequent references are paginated in the text.
2. Trilling does not, of course, believe that the "university mind wilts and withers whatever it touches", but he believes its capacity for discovering and disclosing the power of a work of art is best revealed "with works of art of an older period" (10).
3. During the 60's (at a time when, to borrow a phrase of Frank Kermode, the chickens of modernism had come home to roost), such affirmations of departmental weakness would surely have struck many student radicals as so much disingenuousness.
4. Cf. a recent comment of Luis Bunuel as reported by Carlos Fuentes: "We could [forty years ago] attack the bourgeoisie, surprise it, because it was so *sure of itself* and its institutions." "The Discreet Charm of Luis Bunuel," *The New York Times Magazine* (March 11, 1973), 91 [emphasis added].