

The Strenuous Life

The Moral Obligation To Be Intelligent: Selected Essays

Lionel Trilling

Edited by Leon Wieseltier

Farrar, Straus & Giroux

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REVIEWED BY

Algis Valiunas

Lionel Trilling (1905-1975) was as fine a literary critic as one will ever find among the professoriate—he spent his entire academic life at Columbia University—and incomparably finer than any of the oh-so-bright boys and girls dispensing post-modernist multicultural juju today. His work has met a fate befitting its excellence: Nearly all of it is out of print, and Trilling's critical influence has been effectively defunct for years. So one is grateful to Leon Wieseltier, the literary editor of the *New Republic*, for undertaking a Trilling revival with a selection of some thirty of his essays dating from 1938 to 1975, *The Moral Obligation to Be Intelligent*.

Those with minds to use had better learn somehow to use them wisely, and Trilling's mind serves as an exemplum of the sort you're not likely to come across at the college of your choice. His favored intellectual haunts are "the dark and bloody crossroads where literature and politics meet," and one knows only too well what usually happens there: Literature gets blind-sided, coldcocked, and thrashed within an inch of its sorry life. Trilling sees it as his duty—an unfashionable word, whose meaning he elucidated and cherished—to give literature a fighting chance, for without its bracing effect liberal democracy threatens to go spiraling down into moral vacuousness and hyper-egalitarian tyranny: "[L]iterature [has] a bearing upon political conduct because literature, especially the novel, is the human activity that takes the fullest and most precise account of variousness, complexity, difficulty—and pos-

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sibility." Anyone who understands the essential matter thus knows that his life is going to be a long fight.

To Trilling's mind, the principal moral failure of modern intelligence is the brazen arrogance that refuses to acknowledge reasonable bounds to human empire. Creatures who fancy they know a thing or two that eluded their Creator, intellectuals have taken it upon themselves to make the world over again and do a better job of it than God managed in the first place. The most perilous unwisdom lies in this inability to accept life as it is. Those who profess the loftiest, most disinterested love of mankind do not scruple at doing away with millions of their fellow men whose incorrigible nature gets in the way of an imagined perfection. As Trilling states in the 1941 essay "T.S. Eliot's Politics," "At the bottom of at least popular Marxism there has always been a kind of disgust with humanity as it is and a perfect faith in humanity as it is to be." Perfect faith translates into perfect foolishness, but it is not the fools who pay the dearest price for their doomed project.

In the splendid 1947 essay "Manners, Morals, and the Novel," Trilling warns of "the dangers which lie in our most generous wishes. Some paradox of our nature leads us, when once we have made our fellow men the objects of our enlightened interest, to go on to make them the object of our pity, then of our wisdom, ultimately of our coercion. It is to prevent this corruption, the most ironic and tragic that man knows, that we stand in need of the moral realism which is the product of the free play of the moral imagination." Henry James's Princess Casamassima exemplifies the need for moral reality that is so urgent it falls for the nearest available simulacrum; ashamed of the title and the fortune for which she has sold herself, the Princess imagines herself the noble benefactress of the poor and humble, as she takes up with a violent anarchist cabal. "She is, in short, the very embodiment of the modern will which masks itself in virtue, making itself appear harmless, the will that hates itself and finds its manifestations guilty and is able to exist only if it operates in the name of virtue, that despis-

es the variety and modulations of the human story and longs for an absolute humanity, which is but another way of saying a nothingness."

Politicized intellectuals band together in the name of a single idea, which happens to be a bad idea; and whatever does not accord with that idea they dismiss, for they are "committed not to the fact but to the abstraction," as Trilling puts it in his essay on George Orwell's memoir of the Spanish Civil War, *Homage to Catalonia*. Against the nasty romance of the abstraction, Orwell set the unpalatable truth of the Communist treachery that undermined popular uprising. The theory class, Trilling writes, found the real thing too much for them, and Orwell found no audience for what he had to say. In Trilling's words, "If only life were not so tangible, so concrete, so made up of facts that are at variance with each other; if only the things that people say are good things were really good; if only the things that are pretty good were entirely good and we were not put to the everlasting necessity of qualifying and discriminating; if only politics were not a matter of power—*then* we should be happy to put our minds to politics, *then* we should consent to think!"

Politically authorized thought can be worse than no thought at all. Even so apparently disinterested a document as the 1948 Kinsey Report on human sexuality cleaves to a fundamental premise about the nature of true democracy in which one can recognize the stirrings of political correctness: "We might say that those who most explicitly assert and wish to practice the democratic virtues have taken it as their assumption that all social facts—with the exception of exclusion and economic hardship—must be *accepted*, not merely in the scientific sense but also in the social sense, in the sense, that is, that no judgment must be passed on them, that any conclusion drawn from them which perceives values and consequences will turn out to be 'undemocratic.'" This contentious sentence caps a passage to do with homosexuality in which Trilling makes the obligatory liberal obeisance to "acceptance and liberation"; but he is too astute not to recognize that in due course we will have to accept the utterly abhorrent and liberate forces that ought to be kept prudently on a strong leash.

The Kinsey presupposition, which Trilling finds distinctively American, is that here can be no legitimate restrictions on most human behavior, no determination as to what might be best or worst, decent or indecent, for anything one chooses to do is as good as anything else. Trilling seems here to divine that the democratic clamor for all but limitless freedom has at its root an obsession with equality: men are permitted freedom only so long as its exercise does not violate any egalitarian precepts. Freedom does not apply where it results in exclusion or economic inequality; tolerance extends to everyone but the intolerant; all others are free to do most anything they please, except where money is concerned, for the freedom of the wealthy to keep the money they have made and to pass it all on to their rightful heirs would offend against equality. The logical consequences of Trilling's observation would seem to land him among the conservatives, although it is not clear that he would be willing to go quite that far.

Twenty-four years later, all the egalitarian chickens have come home to roost, transformed into buzzards of exceptional size and voracity. In the Jefferson Lecture for 1972, "Mind in the Modern World," Trilling turns his mind to the condition of higher education, and once again confronts the virtuous democrat's dilemma between quality and equality, discrimination and indiscriminateness. As the outcry grows ever more strident that American colleges and universities do not do enough for the cause of equality, "their equalizing function is being made fully explicit and the tendency grows ever stronger to say that they must be wholly defined by the function in which they are now said to fail." All the *lux et veritas* business aside, the view prevails that college is intended above all "to enable as many people as possible to pass from a lower to a higher position in society." Affirmative action is a natural outgrowth of this belief, and to its "general and ideal good... every person of good will is bound to give happy assent." But then Trilling dissents from this sunniness and self-congratulation. To abandon "traditional standards of training and achievement" in the face of criticism that such standards are designed specifically to keep certain people out is

moral and intellectual cowardice. Failing to speak up in its own defense, mind abdicates its place in the academy; intellectual probity dissolves in the acids of resentment, eaten away by "the ideological trend which rejects and seeks to discredit the very concept of mind." Trilling's sad prescience foresees the ruin of the universities, which no longer have a place for a man like him.

Things really started to go wrong in the late nineteenth century, Trilling believes, as evidenced by William Morris's *News From Nowhere*, a blithe utopian fantasy that envisions a society of perfect equality and blissful torpor. To safeguard the innocence of this stress-free zone, Morris proscribes philosophy, science, and serious art, which breed anxiety and competition and authoritarian tendencies; the inhabitants of *Nowhere* will work, or more precisely amuse themselves, only with their hands, and will let their minds enjoy complete rest. The only hitch Morris sees is that, as Trilling writes, some of his happy tribe "might be expected to feel... that being a person is not interesting in the way that novelists had shown it to be in the old unregenerate time." Equality perfected is a runaway steamroller that leaves every human complication in its path, every bemusing protuberance of character, flattened like an empty beer can.

Trilling speaks for the old imperfect world, which he would not do without, and the best men he can think of are those who have come to terms with life at its coldest and hardest. The sterling essay "Wordsworth and the Rabbis" notes the essential similarity between the teaching of the *Pirke Aboth*, a second-century trove of rabbinical wisdom, and that of the nobly humble Romantic poet; above all, they share "a certain insouciant acquiescence in the anomalies of the moral order of the universe, a respectful indifference to, or graceful surrender before, the mysteries of the moral relation of God to man." Citing the Victorian sage Matthew Arnold on the difference between Wordsworth and Lord Byron, Trilling declares that a significant part of Wordsworth's value lies in "his indifference to 'man's fiery might,' to the Byronic courage in fronting human destiny."

Byron's flamboyant defiance of a cruel God had a telling influence on the spiritual attitudes of the modern intellectual, with their staginess and nose-thumbing; Wordsworth's calm endurance has not had so striking an effect, but it is the superior courage. Endurance such as his gives birth to something greater, and in defining this something Trilling refers by way of contrast to T.S. Eliot's characteristically modern taste for "the violence of extremity. We imagine, with nothing in between, the dull not-being of life, the intense not-being of death; but we do not imagine being—we do not imagine that it can be a joy."

Such joy might be most potent in those who have been savaged by life, and who are not far removed from death. To have reason for despair and yet to wrest from one's suffering a heroic measure of joy constitutes perhaps the most estimable human triumph, to Trilling's mind. The man capable of such a feat knows the fullness of life better than any other, and Trilling holds him up as the exemplar of understanding and vitality to be revered. John Keats is Trilling's hero, as Shake-

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spere was Keats's. Dead of consumption at 26, but not before he had produced some of the most marvelous poems and most fascinating letters ever written, Keats came to a profound understanding of his place in the world, and lived with an intensity at once defiant and accepting—defiant of the powers that threatened to break his spirit along with his body, accepting of the sorrowful, but by no means uniquely sorrowful, fate that was his in this “vale of soul-making.” In his youth he achieved the wisdom of age, and of the ages: “This wisdom is the proud, bitter, and joyful acceptance of tragic life which we associate pre-eminently with Shakespeare.” “The Poet as Hero: Keats in His Letters” is the best essay in this remarkable collection, a model of criticism at its most subtle and serious, looking deep into the mind and heart of a great writer, discerning what made him the man he was, explaining why he matters so.

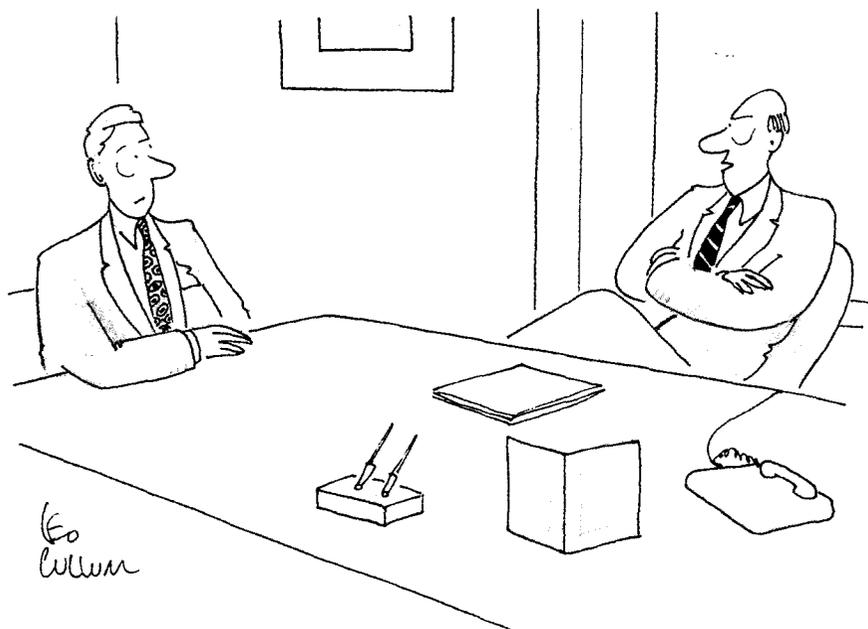
The tragic view of life is not always joyous, but even at its most dour it possesses an honest clarity that makes it far preferable to the millennialist fantasies that have been the bane of modernity. Isaac Babel

was a Russian Jew who rode with mounted Soviet troops in Poland, and who was appalled by much of what he and his Cossack comrades did in the name of revolutionary justice. In the collection of stories *Red Cavalry*, Babel negotiates the perilous moral terrain between “two ways of being, the way of violence and the way of peace....” Babel’s tragic ambivalence toward the Revolution did not sit well with Soviet authorities, and he met the end customary for his kind. As Trilling writes, Babel’s subversive forthrightness “implied that there was more than one way of being. It hinted that one might live in doubt, that one might live by means of a question.” In the story “Gedali” the question is posed most emphatically, as a Jewish shopkeeper offers cogent reflections “on the impossibility of a revolution made in blood, on the International that is never to be realized, the International of the good.” Trilling honors the possibility that the question may be decisive while any answer is inadequate; still, it seems clear that when Trilling, like Babel, asks himself the questions, How far is justice possible in this world?, and Which is the most just

of possible societies?, he does incline more toward one answer than the other.

Trilling is a self-described liberal writing to other liberals about the virtue of liberalism—“a political position that affirmed the value of individual existence in all its variousness, complexity, and difficulty.” In the preface to *The Liberal Imagination* (1950), he avers, “In the United States at this time liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition.” Fifty years on, things have changed, and it is chiefly conservatives who possess the liberal imagination as Trilling understood it. Variousness the way liberal see it these days refers almost exclusively to skin color or sexual taste, and all those of a particular color or sexual taste are expected to think the thoughts and feel the feelings prescribed for their caste. As for complexity and difficulty, American intellectuals of all persuasions like their stories to be both simple and fantastic—for some, queer theory and post-colonialism and trigger-lock; for others, the ultimate authority of the market—but the doctrinaire egalitarianism of the liberals is not to be outdone for stultifying simplicity. Most important, virtually no one who currently calls himself liberal can abide the notion that a liberal education ought to introduce one to “the best that has been known and thought in the world,” in the most famous phrase of Matthew Arnold who was the subject of Trilling’s doctoral dissertation and first book. To presume to distinguish between the best and the rest violates what is pretty well the only tenet of post-modern intellectual decorum: Nothing is better than anything else, with the proviso that the ideas and creations civilized people think superior are actually inferior, and vice versa.

Trilling is the product of a type of education now almost universally derided and all but impossible to come by: a Great Book education. Leon Wieseltier, in his elegant introduction to Trilling’s essays, points out that the phrase “The Moral Obligation to Be Intelligent” was the title of an essay by Trilling’s teacher John Erskine, who was the founder of the General Honors courses at Columbia, “the immersion in great books that eventually transformed undergraduate education in America.” The virtues of such an education are the deepened aware-



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ess of human variety that can come only
y reading old books—an appreciation for
oughts and sentiments alien to those
revalent in modern democratic Ameri-
a—and the discernment to choose among
he ways of life that pour forth so invitingly
rom this moral cornucopia. To the Ameri-
can soul, variety has a greater appeal than
liscernment. In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates
bserve that democratic men have a taste
or trying first some of this and then a little
of that, and that they find it difficult ever to
ettle on any one thing. The American
notto of try-anything-once is to be found in
he 1950's New York poet Frank O'Hara's "In
Memory of My Feelings": "Grace/ To be
orn and live as variously as possible."
Trilling is essentially a variety man, but of
rarely discerning sort. Although his pen-
chant is for thinking his way into the most
complicated moral questions rather than
out of them, he does not shy away from
clarity about what he admires and what he
can't stand. He is very much a modern man
and a democrat, but the democracy he most
esteems is that of its nineteenth-century
youth, when the belief in a newly wide-
spread nobility produced an art, above all in
the novel, that was animated by "the pas-
ionate—the 'revolutionary'—interest in
what man should be. It was, that is, a moral
interest, and the world had a sense of a
future moral revolution." The seedy rem-
nants of these majestic visions move Trilling
to a melancholy but still vigorous scorn.

That vigor persisted despite the temp-
eration to lie down and take a long nap, as
it became increasingly evident that the
culture Trilling championed was a lost
cause. He was sworn to fight to the end,
to conduct a brave rear-guard action
against the advancing forces of untruth,
vulgarity, and viciousness. Now that
everyone can talk of nothing but diversity,
the actual variety of living thought with
which college students become acquaint-
ed grows ever more pinched and impov-
erished. Still, the way is not lost for every-
one; Trilling's writings point the direction
that education can still take, at least for
those few who are unembarrassed by
their defiant singularity. Literature, like
politics, is the art of the possible, and
that remains true even though the rich-
est possibilities grow ever less likely to
be realized. ❧



New Yorker

Tumescient musings about the tumid creep who is now leaving the White House with the toilets unflushed:

Reading [Joe] Klein's article, I could not help thinking how like a classic hero Clinton is. Everything about such people is big—their loves, their eagerness to do spectacular things, their deep understanding of how the world works, and also their moral failings and their need to win. Clinton's enemies never grasped this; they measured him according to their own smallness. The rest of us, meanwhile, are already beginning to suffer withdrawal pangs. We feel lucky that we shared our time with him, and a little sad knowing that someone like him probably won't pass our way again. At least, not in the next four years.

—BATYA DAGAN
Los Angeles, Calif.

[NOVEMBER 6, 2000]

Salon

In reviewing the hit flick, *Charlie's Angels*, another of *Salon's* fat little writers daydreams of salacity and sexual hygiene before the consequent nose-bleed:

But they also get to be more femme. Sure, the original *Angels* came frosted with pounds of hairspray and lip gloss. But they have nothing on these new girls, who demonstrate their pussy power by vamping, mocking and altering their femininity at will. They wear wigs and makeup, serve up cleavage like a meal and display their a--es like plumage. They wake up in men's beds. And this in no way diminishes their credibility as crime fighters or their likability as characters. They play to an audience that gets it, that understands that straight women appreciate other women's bodies (I was riveted by the sight of Diaz unzipping her wet suit to her navel), that sex workers and sluts deserve some respect and that there is nothing wrong

with being a sex object if your objective is to have sex. These girls are definitely looking back in something other than anger, and winking too.

[NOVEMBER 16, 2000]

The American Spectator

Admittedly a historic first for this department, but we would be remiss to ignore this adolescent outburst that quite possibly transcends anything published in a college student newspaper during the fall semester:

I Ted. Xtreme & damn proud. EXTREMISTS FOUNDED AMERICA. Some people with small minds call me an extremist. It is weird, extremely weird, to be given such a compliment by such an obviously uncomplimentary source....

The intricate plumbing of a gutpile is extremely fascinating. I love my family extremely. I am extremely dissatisfied with any status quo. Open heart surgery is extreme. Michael Jordan is an extreme athlete. I hate the IRS extremely. I extremely believe in my independence and individuality. I drive an extreme truck. I sleep extremely quiet. I climb trees extremely high. I would shoot a dog in the head that is chewing on a child. I plant an extreme number of trees every year. I use extreme measures to deal with extreme conditions. I would use the most extreme source of water possible to extinguish a fire. I want to be extremely happy. My balls are Xtremely sensitive.

[DECEMBER 2000/JANUARY 2001]

San Francisco Chronicle

The Hitler mentality springs up in northern California:

Editor—I want "Garfield" out of the comics. His killing of spiders is in no way funny.

—DAN STOFLE
Palo Alto

[NOVEMBER 25, 2000]

MSNBC.com

At the end of Campaign 2000, with a the vituperation still clanging in our ears, the President's moral megaphone Professor Paul Begala, describes the map depicting the Republican presidential votes and attempts to cool passions and encourage thoughtfulness:

But if you look closely at that map you see a more complex picture. You see the state where James Byrd was lynched—dragged behind a pickup truck until his body came apart—it's red. You see the state where right-wing extremists blew up a federal office building and murdered scores of federal employees—it's red. The state where an Army private who was thought to be gay was bludgeoned to death with a baseball bat, and the state where neo-Nazi skinheads murdered two African-Americans because of their skin color, and the state where Bob Jones University spews its anti-Catholic bigotry: they're all red too.

[NOVEMBER 13, 2000]

New Yorker

The new Dr. Ruth makes a heroic effort to prevent a rift in American-Chinese understanding:

Peter Hessler reports that when teaching Chinese students Shakespeare's *Sonnet 1* ("Shall I compare thee to a summer day?") he told them, "Four centuries ago Shakespeare loved a woman and wrote a poem about her ("Hamlet Meets Mao, November 13th). Although scholars argue about the identity of Shakespeare's beloved, many are convinced that this person was a beautiful young man, not a woman. Now that bowdlerizing Shakespeare is no longer deemed acceptable in the West, we should avoid exporting the practice to Asia.

—RUTH VANIT
Associate Professor of Liberal Studies and
Women's Studies, University of Montana
Missoula, Mont.

[NOVEMBER 27, 2000]