

The Humanist as Ghost?

The Last Decade: Essays and Reviews, 1965-75, Lionel Trilling, edited by Diana Trilling (Uniform Edition), *New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979. 241 pp. \$9.95.*

THIS IS A volume, presumably the final one, in the collected edition of the *oeuvre* of one of our century's preeminent critics. Since its contents have so far been uncollected—two items left incomplete at the author's death (1975), another two never before in print—the book is something of an *omnium-gatherum*. Its variety, though, mars neither its coherence nor unity. Anyone interested in Trilling or concerned about today's cultural crises will welcome it. *The Last Decade* may not add notably to its author's stature, but it proves no falling-off of his powers.

The book comprises eleven pieces, a brief headnote dating and describing each. These range through introductions done for other volumes, long essay-reviews, lectures, essays, and an appendix, "Some Notes for an Autobiographical Lecture." To our loss, this last was the start of a memoir Trilling planned as his next project when death intervened. Two of the essays are more or less directly political, dealing with the radicalism of the Great

Depression and of the World War II period and its aftermath. Three will be of solid value to students of literature: those on James Joyce, on the history of criticism, and on Jane Austen. Among its other riches, this last makes, I would say, a contribution to our understanding of tragic catharsis. But the paramount concern of *The Last Decade* is with a syndrome of postmodernist culture which might be labeled the fatty degeneration of the intellect. No fewer than four of the major papers deal centrally with this pathology.

In "Aggression and Utopia," Trilling remarks that once we could smile at the Victorian socialist William Morris, who in his *News from Nowhere* offered a dream of universal goodness wherein human aggressivity would be rooted out. Today, however, its argument has become "an active ideal," exemplified in, say, B. F. Skinner's *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*. Morris' utopia not only eliminated any intellectual activity; it also preferred to maturity and effort a vision of "childhood and rest"—a felicity spelling regression. Skinner *et al.* are symptoms of how our culture is abandoning a value crucial to the humanistic tradition: "the imaginative will of genius in aggressive adversary relation to the world as it is, shaping the intractable stuff of error-laden and suffering humanity into high art."

Such is also the thesis of "Art, Will, and Necessity." How will—that faculty of the intellectual and moral character we used to call "will power"—how this directing and discriminating force develops, Trilling explains in the light of Freudian ego-psychology. The tiny infant, enveloped in solipsism, comes gradually to sense a world outside itself; to survive, the baby learns to surrender his "omnipotent subjectivity," to recognize "necessity" (the demands of the objectified universe), and so acquires some "ability to deal with the external world in individual acts of will." The "ego" should grow and gain strength; yet it can be tempted to retreat to the comfort of a less strenuous stage, regress to subjectivity, even to "the megalomania of narcissism." By its challenge, "necessity" requires and

assures the integrity and authority of will-asserting selfhood.

Out of such psychologizing Trilling draws analogies to the plight of postmodernist culture: vanguard arts and letters reveal a further retreat of mind from its past vigor. The visual arts offer meaninglessness and move toward their own extinction; and "'the heroic concept of masterpieces'" is now defunct. Contrariwise, in traditional usage, *masterpiece* meant that the work derived its value from the ways in which the artist mastered the difficulties of his metier and his world. Quoting the art critic Harold Rosenberg that the dream of today's artist is for "'a super-art presumably able to encompass all experience,'" Trilling considers this mish-mash another "fantasy" of all-engulfing subjectivity, "regression to infantile narcissism." Similarly, to the structuralist theory and practice among certain contemporary novelists he objects on two grounds. In their fictional characters individual intention is represented as nothing more than one of the *formalistic* elements in the aesthetic of the novel. Second, "the redemptive power of the structuralist vision" portends, ideologically, "'a politics of love.'" A world-view of bringing order into human affairs by ending the conflict of wills would foster not liberalism, but totalitarianism. As to "The Uncertain Future of the Humanistic Educational Ideal," its author appears more certain than his title indicates. In brief, Trilling sees no hope here for the remainder of our century.

The keystone of this book is "Mind in the Modern World." Elsewhere I have called *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972) Trilling's *summa*. And this piece—originally the lecture given when he was the first recipient of the Jefferson Award of the National Endowment for the Humanities—is the perfect epilogue for that volume. In some respects the compendium of a *summa*, it calls for, and rewards, strenuous reading. For Trilling focuses on the chaos in our culture and its anti-intellectualism, as these have practical bearings on the health of our nation's polity. Beginning with Jefferson's philosophy of education and of

equality, he notes a foreboding kinship between the waning confidence in the disciplined mind and our death-of-the-past presupposition.

For guidance we have consultants and think-tanks. But in their abstractness and technicalities, scientists, economists, and philosophers can no longer communicate with the rest of us lay people. Literary specialists, with their "hyper-activity of criticism and scholarship" and their "elaborate and sophisticated methods," make literature "an esoteric subject available only to expert knowledge." From such professors themselves has come the announcement that the study of literature has no educative power, exists only in "the realm of the aesthetic," and is remote from everyday actualities.

Behind the breakdown of authority, a phenomenon palpable to everyone, is the breakdown of the authority of mind. In the claims of equality, a sizeable contingent of intellectuals welcomes this particular weakening. Not long ago our colleges and universities enjoyed a modicum of esteem as agencies of enlightenment and humanization and as serving the ideal of the disinterested mind. They were also recognized, despite shortcomings, as pathways for upward social mobility. Now, with stress on this latter function, they are "primarily agencies of social accreditation." Moving too slowly toward equalization, they encounter the "affirmative action" program. This program requires that institutions of higher education which receive federal funds act at once to recruit faculty members who will provide "a statistically adequate representation" of ethnic minorities. As to the criteria of professional excellence, just how this drastic change was to affect students, teachers, and eventually society has been generally ignored. What strikes Trilling is not merely that "traditional standards of training and achievement have been explicitly and as it were officially expunged" as purposing only "discriminatory exclusion"; but even more, that this action has been met by the professoriate in silence, with no debate, no attempt to explain to anyone the real issues

and the practical results, for everyone, of abandoning standards. Such flabby passivity may signalize the low morale among academicians: their reluctance to shape a coherent theory of education, to articulate its purposes, to seek ways to implement these purposes through curriculum and requirements. Further, among students and teachers emerges an "ideological trend" patently anti-intellectual: the concept of mind traditional in Western civilization is branded as "dehumanizing and life-denying." Such ideologists undercut order-and-hierarchy, which is implicit in the very idea of mind and must be explicit in those persons whose task is to put intellectual enterprise into effect.

Mind is also assaulted for its long-standing ideal of objectivity. The anti-traditionalist premise here is a sort of psychology-of-scientism, a notion that "abstract cognition" is the overruling force of mind. Against this muddle, Trilling remarks that objectivity is not the invention of science. He holds to Arnold's definition: "to see the object as in itself it really is." Granted, such an ideal can never wholly succeed, we can only struggle toward it. But this we must do "out of something like a sense of intellectual honor" and in the faith that good fruits may come from our striving. Also among the enemies of mind are the new theorists of madness. Trilling demonstrates how their logic has roots in the "overtly political": *i.e.*, when we "understand" that society itself is insane, then the "aberration of the individual appears as rationality, as liberation from the delusions of social madness."

Because of his own intellectual humility before a subject so vast and complicated, Trilling, despite his polemic, did not wish his lecture to end as a jeremiad. Nonetheless, he underscores how the contemporary animus against humanism bears on politics. He reminds us that we still judge societies and their governments by the same standards traditionally used to assess "the rightness of the conduct of mind": *e.g.*, by their energy and intentionality, "their striving toward coherence with due

regard for the integrity of the disparate elements they comprise, by their power of looking before and after." What darkens our prospects is "a falling off in mind's vital confidence in itself," in "its own freedom and power." That decline unchecked, we may face "a diminution of national possibility...a lessening of social hope."

For many, postmodernism promises a renaissance. Whether such optimism is reasonable remains to be seen. Our new civilization, at any rate, will not be built from the Renaissance. For a salient impetus of that epoch was the rediscovery of the ancient classics. To the champions of the "new," Lionel Trilling speaks from the grave. If they are right, that the dead past should bury its dead, Trilling and his humanism are only a ghost. If wrong, the ghost haunts us still.

Reviewed by RICHARD B. HOVEY