

and gaiety. He made clumsy efforts to shine as a royal butterfly in the style of Uncle Bertie, and he is supposed to have interrupted Bismarck by saying: “Why is a cigar like a mother-in-law?” At length the old man obtained attention. He recalled at some length Napoleon III’s difficulties and his dependence on his Praetorians, and then suddenly turning to the young Emperor, “Your

Majesty,” he said, “so long as you have your present corps of officers you can do what you like; but if it should ever be otherwise with you, then things will be very different.” There was an awkward silence.

When the goose had left, Bismarck prophesied that disaster would come in 1914 or thereabouts. Frankenstein had recognised a monster in this noisy and paltry creature.

Christopher Sykes

“TO KNOW AND YET NOT TO FEAR REALITY”

Most of these essays were written as introductions to books, and all of them were written for occasions which were not of my own devising. The occasions were quite discrete from one another, the subjects are in some ways diverse, and I wrote the essays with no thought of achieving an interconnection among them. In each case my intention was only to serve the given subject, to say what made a particular book or author interesting and valuable to us. Yet inevitably an interconnection among the essays does exist—apart, I mean, from whatever coherence is to be found in their writer’s notions of what constitutes the interesting and valuable, of what constitutes “us.” The essays deal with episodes of the literature of the last century and a half, and they all, in one way or another, take account of the idea that preoccupies this literature and is central to it, and makes its principle and unity—the idea of the self.

I HAVE quoted in full the first paragraph of Professor Trilling’s introduction to his new volume of eight essays,* not only because it describes the contents of the book, but also because it speaks so excellently both in defence and in condemnation of the essays that follow it. The essays, in fact, have little unity, and such as they have derives from the author’s own general standpoint towards life and literature. That attitude is only partially and imperfectly represented by the “idea of self” as the dominant concept of post-18th century literature, which he develops in the

rest of the introduction. The thesis by which he attempts to unify these unrelated pieces is characteristically wide and abstract. “The modern self,” he says, and by this he means the self that has emerged from the late 18th century onwards, “is characterised by certain powers of indignant perception which, turned upon the unconscious portion of culture, have made it accessible to conscious thought.” And in language hardly less difficult, he explains that this is a description of the writers’ hostility which has extended beyond society in its purely institutional and formal aspect to embrace unconscious assumptions, unformulated valuations, habits, manners, and superstitions. This is clearly true. There is and has been for the last 150 years a growing and deepening criticism of the very texture and style of our civilisation. Literary expression of this criticism has inevitably made more explicit the nature of this texture and style, which Professor Trilling more conveniently than aptly has called society’s “culture.”

In stating that from 1780 or thereabouts writers have been more deeply preoccupied with the antagonism of the self to the unformulated penumbra of society which he calls “culture,” Professor Trilling is not perhaps guilty of expounding a truism; the analysis has not perhaps been so exactly made before; yet it is hardly a surprising one. Above all, it is a very wide and abstract thesis which extends far beyond the position of the writer. To apply it to individual authors, and more still to individual books, would hardly seem likely to illuminate more than a very

* *The Opposing Self*. By LIONEL TRILLING. Secker and Warburg. 16s.

general outline. So, in fact, in these eight essays, it proves to be. This need not, however, detain us; for the thesis, clearly an afterthought when the essays were brought together, plays only a very minor role.

It is, nevertheless, interesting that Professor Trilling, in searching for an unity, should have devised so wide, so abstract an argument, for it is these qualities which above all mark, and, I think, mar his literary criticism. On first thought, it would seem likely that introductions to individual books would suffer in reprinting from their too particular nature, their too close relation to the text which they were intended to introduce. Such a presumption might apply to many literary critics, but not to Professor Trilling. His abstracting tendency can be relied upon to speak above and beyond any text. No one would wish to dispute the great depth which has been given to literary criticism by harnessing to its services other branches of learning. Semantics, metaphysics, theology, psychology, moral philosophy, all have done service to rescue the discussion of literature from the aimless ambling of belle lettrism, the profitless track of historical descent, the wild flights of biographical hunches; the danger is now that the new and more powerful steeds will run away with literature all together.

THE reaction from the old methods came with the demand for more close relation to the text. At the same time, it is the peculiar glory of the modern school of critics that they should have asserted so firmly the integral connection between literature and life, the deadness of literary criticism that does not take account of other branches of human thought and activity. It is also peculiar and perhaps peculiarly unfortunate that this same school should be so largely drawn from the Universities. Professor Trilling's humanity speaks loudly for itself; it speaks with a stentorian voice above that of many of the leaders of the New Criticism; even so, the most vital of critics needs constant injections of humanity. Paradoxically, I think that these injections will come best from an almost pedantic attachment to text, for the text gives us the writer and it is from the writer's humanity that the critics must be fed. It is sad, then, in these essays to find how seldom the author—so penetrating a student of literature, even, on occasion, so exciting a dis-

coverer—draws upon text for his vitality, how often he dilutes his humanity with draughts of philosophy, of psychology, of any other widely abstracting discipline of mind that may swell the original seed of his literary penetration into a shapeless, unappetising fruit.

The full flavour of this fruit may be found in Professor Trilling's style and it is very unpalatable. The opening passage of his introduction, which I have quoted, may once again serve as an example. It labours after philosophical exactitude; it eschews ornament; yet it demands abstraction where none is needed—"of what constitutes *the interesting* and the *valuable*, of what constitutes 'us'"—and it abounds in repetition: "preoccupies this literature, and is central to it, and makes its principle and unity." It has like most serious modern American criticism a touch of the rhetorical, a ring of the sermon, but rhetoric that is carefully desiccated, a sermon that is self-consciously dry as dust. His style has not so much of the philosophical jargon, the Germanic compounds and syntax that make most of the American New Criticism so distasteful, though it is not utterly without them; but it is needlessly difficult, at once dry and verbose. Though ornament or figure are forbidden, yet there is on occasion a distastefully affected ring in the choice of words—"the strengthening of these bonds by the acts and *attitudes* of Charity is a great and *charming* duty." It is, in short, a style of writing that never assists and often seriously hinders the reading of these excellent essays.

FOR excellent and illuminating they are, despite all that has to be said in general criticism of them; and, above all, stimulating—both to contradiction and to further exploration along the same exciting tracks. Like most occasional pieces, they are of unequal merit; but, above all, the most successful are those whose themes lie closest to the author's own view of life. The formulation, the elucidation of his own philosophy always preoccupies Professor Trilling. When his theme lies within the orbit of this preoccupation, he feels free to explore at will, to go along with his subject—with Keats or Wordsworth, with James's hero Basil Ransom, or with Flaubert's saintly copy clerks—to an exposition which is complete and wonderfully illuminating. It is then that the subordination of

the latter to philosophical exploration seems least damaging, seems indeed hardly to damage at all. On occasion, however, his contact with his theme is only partial or tangential and then, too often, a good essay, a promising line of thought is damaged by being cramped into the mould. So it is, I think, with the essays on *Little Dorrit* and *Mansfield Park*. Finally, there are those themes which seem hardly to touch his pre-occupations at all and then he is often content with conclusions that are hardly more than banal. Such, I think, is the essay on *Anna Karenina*.

It may perhaps be best cursorily to examine some aspects of this failure before attempting to outline what seems to me to be Professor Trilling's view of life as illustrated in the best of these essays.

In the essay on *Anna Karenina*, he seems almost content to tell us that Tolstoy's greatness lies in “the trueness to life” of his work. No reader of *Anna Karenina* can have failed to feel this. It is here surely that an analysis of the *mise en scène* of the novel, of the juxtaposition of events, of the suddenness by which the reader's expectations are deceived and he is led on to accept a new expectation as inevitable, of such technical brilliance, would have been enlightening. For it is by these means that, in part at any rate, Tolstoy convinces us. Professor Trilling warns us that Tolstoy's truth is not necessarily “truer” than Dostoevsky's; but he says nothing of the strange contrast in which each diminishes and elevates man's soul in entirely different aspects. Tolstoy's truth, in fact, hardly touches the author's, and so he has little to say about him.

The essay on *Little Dorrit* is more illuminating. He sees clearly Dickens' complex treatment of self-pity and injured gentility—the self-mutilation that the social will imposes upon such characters as Fanny Dorrit and Harry Gowan, on Miss Wade and Mrs. Clennam. He rightly regards *Little Dorrit* herself as the holy child, the negation of the social will by which alone we are freed from the prison house that dominates the novel. To make *Little Dorrit* only a story of negation of the social will, however, leads him to reduce Mr. Dorrit to a minor role, mitigate the vileness of Mr. Merdle, and elevate the importance of Blandois. A single reading of the novel will show that this is

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absurd—the author's preoccupation has forced a living work of art into a convenient box.

Something of the same sort occurs in the essay on *Mansfield Park*. His analysis of this novel up to a point is quite masterly, though I believe that much of what he argues about Fanny Price would have been unnecessary had he compared her with Ann Eliot and not with Elizabeth Bennet. However, he sees almost to the core of Jane Austen's moral æsthetic, to the contrast between Fanny's commitment to duty and Mary Crawford's commitment to impersonation, to insincerity. One of his preoccupations, however, is a defence of passive, vegetable virtue—it is the theme he so brilliantly expounds in the Wordsworth essay—and so he is led away from the penetrating study of the significance of the house in *Mansfield Park* for Fanny, into an elaborate attempt to exalt Lady Bertram as a half-ironic exposition of the virtues of vegetable existence. Once again, no reading of the novel, of Edmund's decent observance of his mother's position—decent

but no more—can possibly admit such an absurdity.

WHAT, then, are the aspects of life which so strongly predispose Professor Trilling that they can so make or mar his literary criticism? He stands, it seems, with the heroes of the modern literary critical world—with Yeats and Lawrence and Eliot—up to a point. His agreement with them is well expressed in a remark of Basil Ransom, the hero of James's *The Bostonians*. "The whole generation is womanised," says Ransom, "the masculine tone is passing out of the world, it's a feminine, a nervous, chattering, canting age, an age of hollow phrases and false delicacy and exaggerated solicitudes and coddled sensibilities, which, if we don't soon look out, will usher in the reign of mediocrity, of the feeblest and flattest and the most pretentious that has even been. The masculine character, the ability to dare and endure, to know and yet not to fear reality, to look the world in the face and take it for what it is—a very queer and partly very base mixture—this is what I want to preserve, or rather, as I may say, recover."

It is this theme that Trilling so admires in *The Bostonians* and the essay, as a result, is quite brilliant. He finds this same manly courage and acceptance in Keats's letters, and with it another quality which he demands of

life, Keats's famous "Negative Capability," the refusal to shut out life by going out for dogmatic truth. It is here that he parts company with his Anglo-Catholic allies. Indeed, it is somewhat in the teeth of Mr. Eliot that he further pursues this Negative Capability aspect of virtue in the vegetable, almost mineral existence of Wordsworth's old men, in the goodness, the acceptance of life of the Idiot Boy—the virtue of simply being. In a brilliant side hit at Mr. Eliot, he shows how little it is possible for the author of the *Cocktail Party* to conceive a *living* virtue that is not violent and extreme, how dead is the virtue of those who must accept the simple round in this play. Finally in "Bouvard and Pécuchet," he pursues another sort of sanctity, the sanctity of these active-minded, simple, *loving* men, the sanctity of Leopold Bloom.

These four essays, then, are a recompense and more for all the faults of the book. They are quite brilliant in themselves, but they have a courage rare in these days to accept the reaction against liberal sloppiness, to demand a manly, courageous acceptance of a "partly very base" reality, and yet to refuse the violence, the sin obsession, the dogmatism, and the aristocratic arrogance that usually accompany this reaction and insist on the virtues of passivity, acceptance, negative capability, and love.

Angus Wilson

AT LAST—THE TRUTH!

"AT LAST—the truth . . ." is a dear enemy among blurbs, if only because one knows that it can never be justified. "At last—the truth about the Brighton Pavilion" might, or might not, be a fair claim provided the book in question confined itself to surveyor's reports, transcripts of accounts, and inventories of contents. But "At last—the truth about Herzegovina," with its pendants "The only authoritative eyewitness account" and "What life is really like in Herzegovina today," is a very different matter: it assumes, what mercifully does

not (at any rate as yet) exist, a standardised observer, an invariable reaction, a universal point of view. What life is really like in Herzegovina for Mr. Joker Playfair, ace correspondent, is (I dare say) not awfully like what it would be for me or you; and is (I dare say) awfully like what it is for Mr. Joker Playfair in Hemel Hempstead. It is the sky that changes, not the I.

Still less can the truth, "at last" or otherwise, be found within the confines of the novel, which is concerned essentially with the individual and unique interpretation of the