Lionel Trilling (1905---75) opened his first collection of critical essays, The Liberal Imagination (1950), with a piece ambitiously titled “Reality in America.” Skeptical of “the chronic American belief that there exists an opposition between reality and mind and that one must enlist oneself in the party of reality,” he posed the obvious questions: Which “reality”? Whose “reality”? The judgment that Theodore Dreiser is a more significant writer than Henry James depends upon certain cultural assumptions, summarized by Trilling as “a kind of political fear of the intellect.” The approved model of the mind, and of reality, born of such fear, is materialistic and external. Ideas, and idealism, are rejected as sentimental indulgences acceptable only to those who float irresponsibly above the fray of daily living. Against this view, Trilling spent his whole career arguing that reality, however understood, must allow for a dialectic between the practical and the theoretical, “and in any culture there are likely to be certain artists who contain a large part of the dialectic within themselves, their meaning and power lying in their contradictions.”

Trilling belonged to perhaps the last generation of academics who believed that they had something of general social importance to communicate, and who really did have such an influence. By contrast, it might be thought that never did literary criticism have less of interest to say to the world beyond the academy than it does today. Trilling, in his time an influential social and cultural commentator, appears to be as forgotten as F. R. Leavis is in Britain. Both were still, just about, on my reading lists as an undergraduate forty years ago; but now? In a second-hand bookshop recently, I came across several of Leavis’s books, on the flyleaf of which the bookseller had penciled “Of historical interest.” I suppose that was meant to be charitable. Is Trilling, also, merely of historical interest?

Adam Kirsch thinks not, and following his short, punchy book Why Trilling Matters (2011) he has edited a selection of Trilling’s letters, spanning the period 1924 to 1975, with remarkable self-effacement (a preface barely five pages long and footnotes so sparing that one actually wishes for
Trilling’s output in his lifetime consisted of two full-length books, on Matthew Arnold (1939), a solid and still profitable work, and a slighter study of E. M. Forster (1943); one novel, *The Middle of the Journey* (1947), which is more impressive than usually supposed (as a political novel it is better than Henry James’s *Princess Casamassima*, which he consistently overrated); and four collections of essays and lectures—*The Liberal Imagination*, already mentioned, *The Opposing Self* (1955), *Beyond Culture* (1965), and *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972). There were several other, posthumously published, collections, supervised by his widow, Diana, who also wrote a memoir, *The Beginning of the Journey* (1993).

“In a collection of essays,” Trilling wrote, “you are presenting a person.” The person we discern in his books is appropriately complex. Trilling was delighted when Etienne Gilson said he did not think of him as a literary critic. Writing in 1951 to Norman Podhoretz—with whom his relationship, as shown by these letters, was never easy—he protested, “I am as much disillusioned by criticism as an academic discipline nowadays as I am by scholarship.” He rarely practiced close textual analysis, and his significance may be more as a cultural than a literary figure. His own description of his *modus operandi* was “the genre of discourse.” He is a synthesizer rather than an analyst, operating in the field of the history of ideas. He is as likely to write about Hegel, Marx, and Freud as he is about Jane Austen, Keats, and Flaubert (whose *Bouvard et Pécuchet* he is almost alone in recognizing as a masterpiece).

It’s easy to see why Trilling is neglected. His belief in the value of a traditional liberal humane education is abhorrent to current fashions. He saw Structuralism, which surfaced late in his career, as a literary variant of Stalinism, subordinating individual autonomy and freedom to the demands of a collective. His experience of the 1968 student protests at Columbia (which, according to his wife, he found oddly exhilarating) surfaces in only one letter printed by Kirsch, in which he tells Pamela Hansford Johnson that, angry as he is at the students’ behavior, many of those he has talked to “command my respect and even liking. I would find it easier to be simple, but I cannot be.”

Many others, of course, find it all too easy to be simple. In his 1972 Jefferson lecture, “Mind in the Modern World,” Trilling lamented “our disaffection from history,” which had led to calls for universities to renounce their commitment to excellence in the name of egalitarianism. He judged that such “cynicism and intellectual negation” made serious thought about education impossible. As for positive discrimination, faculty recruitment on any basis other than that of “professional excellence,” he insisted, would be a disaster. One can only imagine Trilling’s reaction to the no-platforming and PC bullying which has robbed so many universities today of their independence and dignity, and which has deprived generations of students of an education worthy of the name. In a world where *Huckleberry Finn*, one of the greatest anti-racist works ever written, is conspicuous by its absence from many university reading lists, while issue-driven trivia are compulsory reading, Trilling’s comment has fresh relevance: “no one who reads thoughtfully the dialectic of Huck’s great moral crisis will
ever again be wholly able to accept without some question and some irony the assumptions of the respectable morality by which he lives.” There is a different “respectable morality” in place now, but its adherents are just as unthinking as their predecessors. Without a sense of the past, Trilling wrote, our lives might be easier, but “we might also be less generous, and certainly we would be less aware. . . . The refinement of our historical sense chiefly means that we keep it properly complicated.”

Trilling is thought of as a modernist, but his celebrated essay “On the Teaching of Modern Literature” (1961) makes clear that “modernism” for him meant Proust, Joyce, Lawrence, Eliot, Yeats, Mann, Kafka, Rilke, and Gide.

Trilling is thought of as a modernist, but his celebrated essay “On the Teaching of Modern Literature” (1961) makes clear that “modernism” for him meant Proust, Joyce, Lawrence, Eliot, Yeats, Mann, Kafka, Rilke, and Gide. As these letters show, his attitude to the literature of his own time was wary. “My relation to modern verse,” he admitted to Podhoretz in 1950, “is very largely academic and dutiful—it seldom means as much to me as prose.” Writing to C. P. Snow in 1963, he confessed to “a good deal of resistance” to contemporary literature, born of “a stubborn humanistic conservatism.” He retained a soft spot for his former student Allen Ginsberg (what more incongruous pairing can be imagined?) but could see in Thom Gunn only “a neat-minded bore of a craftsman making well-made poem after well-made poem.” The background reading for his “modernism” course at Columbia included Frazer, Nietzsche, Conrad, Diderot, Tolstoy, and Freud. Such a course would be unthinkable in a modern university, where texts serve to illustrate theory, and creative writing is not read but taught, and rewarded with a degree. Ironically, Trilling’s pantheon consists mainly of writers who might be thought of as right-wing, whereas he himself was understood to be “liberal” (of which more later), and he did not discuss them in detail in his work. In Why Trilling Matters, Kirsch sees this as a “deliberate tactical maneuver” stemming from Trilling’s wish “not to expound modernism but to put it into question,” to weigh his admiration for these writers with his dissent from many of their ideas—or rather, from their ideology, which, as he warns in “The Meaning of a Literary Idea” (The Liberal Imagination), “is not the product of thought” but of an unthinking acceptance of “formulas” whose dangers are hidden from us by our emotional commitment to them. In thrall to formulas, we are liable to be blind to those “contradictions” which, according to “Reality in America,” it is the job of the critic to examine.

Because so many of Trilling’s writings are occasional, his emphasis shifts with the nature of the task. As Mark Krupnick neatly says in Lionel Trilling and the Fate of Cultural Criticism (1986), “His stance is consistent but his opinions are not.” The nearest approach to a manifesto that we have comes in “On the Teaching of Modern Literature”:
[M]y own interests lead me to see literary situations as cultural situations, and cultural situations as great elaborate fights about moral issues, and moral issues as having something to do with gratuitously chosen images of personal being, and images of personal being as having something to do with literary style.

For Arnold, too, as Trilling noted in his book, morality was a matter of style, and culture “a moral orientation” of “the whole personality in search of the truth.” Leavis, with whom Trilling is sometimes misleadingly compared, would have regarded this use of “style” with suspicion. Writing, again, to Podhoretz, who was working with Leavis in Cambridge (and who reviewed The Liberal Imagination for the magazine Scrutiny, hailing Trilling as a critic in the Arnoldian tradition), Trilling admitted he could understand Leavis’s “long pedagogic rage” now that he was supervising graduate dissertations, but was disinclined to emulate it. Suavity mattered to him. Trilling’s “The Leavis–Snow Controversy,” reprinted in Beyond Culture, delivers a solemnly pained rebuke to Leavis for his “impermissible” tone in dealing with Snow. This betrays a failure to understand the tradition of polemical pamphleteering to which Leavis’s lecture belongs—although Trilling’s own criticisms of Snow (which Snow claimed were misrepresentations of his position) are as hard-hitting as Leavis’s.

To define morality as being about right or wrong may be too simple: it is often about conflicting rights. In “Manners, Morals, and the Novel” (The Liberal Imagination), Trilling says more about manners than morals, finally suggesting, in a now familiar argument, that novels exercise a moral function upon us when they force us to question our own motives and the assumptions instilled into us by our education and upbringing. The novel uniquely teaches us “the extent of human variety and the value of this variety.” Such a pluralistic approach, in Kirsch’s view, is reminiscent of Isaiah Berlin. Together with the emphasis on verbal contradictions, it is also akin to William Empson; and, appropriately, Trilling returns repeatedly to the analysis of what Empson called complex words. “Liberal” contains even more contradictions than “moral.” It is so routinely a pejorative term nowadays that it takes an effort to remember that it once had a positive meaning. Writing to a French lycée teacher in 1953, Trilling characterized it as “thoughtfulness, a humane interest in the welfare of others, a degree of commitment to philosophical naturalism, a belief in the possibility of progress by political means, an open mind, the resistance to conservative or reactionary ideas.” Less positively, such an outlook “was inclined to give to Communism an unreasoned and unintelligent sympathy, sentimental in its first impulse, though often hard and bitter in its tenacity.” Hence, as he wrote to Pascal Covici, his editor at Viking Press, the essays in The Liberal Imagination sought to promote a self-critical liberalism, preventing liberal assumptions from becoming “mere comfortable pieties.” Arnold had called himself “a Liberal of the Future”: so might Trilling.

Such “comfortable pieties,” as they impinge upon Judaism and Communism, feature largely in the early letters (here I should mention Edward Alexander’s review of the collection in Standpoint for October 2018, which covers these issues in further detail). Trilling insisted that he was not “a Jewish writer,” but he struggled to gain tenure in an academic world which saw anti-Semitism as acceptable. His twenty-five contributions to The Menorah Journal between 1925 and 1931 find few
echoes in the canonical works. In 1929, when the Journal’s survival was uncertain, Trilling wrote to its editor, Elliot Cohen, pleading for a reprieve. He explained that he had grown up largely indifferent to his parents’ religion (in 1952 he was still insisting that “very little in Jewish religious life speaks to me”) and, indeed, had found Judaism unintelligent, until the Journal offered him an image of Judaism as “accepted and legitimate.” “I did not get religion,” he cautioned, “but I accepted the fact of Jewishness as an important thing.” The Journal, in fact, made Judaism intellectually and socially respectable to him.

Yet his feelings towards Judaism remained ambivalent. In 1933, writing to Addison T. Cutler, he even felt able to maintain that a lecture invitation by Columbia to the German (Nazi) ambassador to the United States, however ill-advised, should not be withdrawn, because “I believe that it is wiser for the University to adhere to the principle of free speech on all occasions with all its possible anomalies than to reject the principle of free speech on any occasion because of any of its anomalies.” Of course, he might have felt differently ten years later; but in 1945, when Elliot Cohen became the founder-editor of Commentary, Trilling refused to join the editorial board, pleading pressure of university work, but also admitting that “so many” of his feelings about Jewish life were “negative.” He worried that to be formally associated with Commentary would limit his freedom to write about—or not to write about—Jewish matters. In 1947 he declined to be a signatory to a report recommending the establishment of a Jewish university, on the grounds that “there are now in America no special Jewish values of a large and important sort.” In 1959 he turned down an invitation to address the Seixas Society, an organization for Jewish students at Columbia, explaining that, “after considerable effort, I can find nothing that I can talk about”—even though we learn, from a letter to Samuel Astrachan in 1960, that he had had a “long continuing desire to write a history of the last days of the Warsaw ghetto.” In 1965 he wrote flatly of “the unsatisfactoriness—the dimness—of [Judaism’s] theological utterances.”

It was not just Judaism which he found unsympathetic. “There isn’t any conceivable actual religious formulation that I can give credence to” (1965) leaves no wiggle room. When Trilling referred to the spiritual, it was in Matthew Arnold’s or Henry James’s sense of the word, as a shorthand for a response to those aspects of human nature and society which were not gross, materialistic, or self-seeking. Despite all this, on his mother’s death in 1964 (when he was in Oxford and could not get back for the funeral), he decided, at his wife’s suggestion, to say the Kaddish, and Isaiah Berlin put him in contact with a group of Jewish students “who regularly hold services at, of all places, Jesus College.” It was, he recognized, “an affecting occasion and helpful in a way I would not have expected.”

Trilling’s initial sympathy with Communism was short-lived. “I must always have a reservation of faith in everything,” he commented to his colleague Alan Brown after the Moscow show trials of August 1936; two years later he was still “in solution about a lot of Marxist doctrine,” he confessed to Sidney Hook. Marx himself is rarely mentioned in these letters. Trilling was never
formally a Party member, and letters of 1946 contain condemnation of Stalinism as “corrupt and
dangerous,” leading to “the death of the spirit.” The Middle of the Journey, in which the Communist
who breaks with the Party is based on Whittaker Chambers, and the bien-pensant fellow-travelers
have their benevolence shown up as a disguise for double standards, displays a keen understanding
that Communism, like Liberalism, was not a single coherent concept, but a spectrum of affiliations.
Writing of the 1940s in a letter of 1957 to John Wain, who had interviewed him for the London
Observer, Trilling pointed out that he had combated “the progressive point of view” associated with
the New Deal, and the “intransient liberal-radicalism” of would-be intellectuals; progressivism,
influenced, often unconsciously, by Communism, what here was called Stalinism,” was
“deteriorating into a new philistinism. It was against this that my essays of the period were directed.”
He refers Wain to the preface to The Liberal Imagination, which “will lead you to see why some
people speak of me as ‘antiliberal.’ ” He may be thinking of the passage in which he identifies
the paradox of liberalism, that in its “vision of a general enlargement and freedom and rational direction
of human life” it “drifts towards a denial of the emotions and the imagination.”

There is a surprising streak of romanticism in Trilling.

There is a surprising streak of romanticism in Trilling. We see it in his unusually warm-hearted
essay on Keats’s letters, in his attraction to a quality of tragic-heroic glamour in F. Scott
Fitzgerald, and, obliquely, in his fascination with Freud—which was not just theoretical. When one
learns, from a letter, that Trilling owed his psychoanalyst nearly $1,500 in 1972, one reflects that he
couldn’t afford (in any sense) not to take Freud seriously. Writing, in 1959, to William Gamble, who
had solicited help with an essay, Trilling explained that he had first read Civilization and its
Discontents when he was twenty-five, and had rejected its thesis as incompatible with the Marxist
economic theory he then accepted, but that he later came to admire it. He admits that his knowledge
of Freud’s writings is far from complete, but that he still entertains the idea (never realized) of
“writing a short book about Freud as a moralist.” Trilling was aware of the reductive schematism
which could result from psychoanalytic “readings”; in letters to the London Times Literary
Supplement and to Jacques Barzun he objected to the “mechanical Freudianism” of Leon Edel’s
treatment of the relationship between William and Henry James. In “Freud and Literature” (The
Liberal Imagination), Trilling places Freud squarely in the nineteenth-century Romantic tradition,
while insisting that he also has a “positivist” side—“he holds to a simple materialism, to a simple
determinism, to a rather limited sort of epistemology”—and that his conception of the hedonistic
function of art is inadequate. Yet, Trilling contends, Freud recognized the poetic capacity of the mind,
its recourse, under pressure, to metaphor, symbolism, indirectness, flashes of insight rather than
logical sequence. Between the pleasure principle and the reality principle a tragic agon takes place:
the death wish is confronted in order that it can be borne. In a later essay, “Freud: Within and Beyond
Culture” (Beyond Culture), Trilling extended this point: the central issue of modern literature has
been the struggle of the self to adjust itself to its culture while at the same time affirming its
autonomy.
In his last completed work, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, which was derived from his Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard for 1969–70, Trilling writes what might be called a natural history of selfhood. The key terms in the title are subjected to historical analysis. To be sincere is to be, as Polonius advised, true to oneself—to be what one seems. Such a correspondence is vital to the health of a society, particularly one in which life is lived to a large extent in the public sphere, and which depends on trust if it is to function at all. To be authentic, however—the central ethical aspiration of modernism, whose philosophical forebear Trilling identified as Hegel—is to affirm whatever one is, or feels oneself to be, without regard for convention or the feelings of others. (Trilling notes the importance of Sartrean existentialism in this context.) In “The Sense of the Past,” Trilling allows that “whether, and in what way, human nature has always been the same,” should be a real question, but that in any case “What we certainly know has changed is the expression of human nature.” For the authentic individual, however, the belief in an essential, shared “human nature” is an illusion, the product of outworn religious, metaphysical, or moral systems, all of them instruments of oppression. It will be obvious how far this has become, in our time, not only an unquestioned but, for many, an unquestionable assumption. Just as Trilling was startled to see his early advocacy of modern literature become so accepted as to marginalize the classics, so he might have been appalled by the degree to which authenticity (which had a positive aspect for him) has become the justification for self-indulgence or solipsism.

*Sincerity and Authenticity* remains a work of real intellectual distinction. It does not feature largely in the letters (or, surprisingly, in *Why Trilling Matters*). Admittedly, the last chapter, in which Trilling attacks the theories of Herbert Marcuse and R. D. Laing, has worn badly; Kirsch prints a severe letter from Trilling to Saul Bellow, in 1974, responding to an essay of Bellow’s which Trilling is forced to conclude deliberately misrepresents his arguments in that chapter. Writing from Oxford, where he was a visiting professor in 1964—65 and again in 1972–73, he reported that the book was selling briskly and had been well reviewed in England, but little noticed in America.

Trilling was not a great one for relaxing vacations; his travels usually had a professional purpose. His impressions of Oxford are recorded in several letters. On his first visit, he and his wife found prices rather steep and were daunted by the social round expected of them—drinks receptions, High Table dinners, lecture invitations, requests for media appearances. The dons, he reported, “have a kind of simplicity in their friendliness.” In 1972, writing to Jacques Barzun from the grander surroundings of All Souls College, he was more observant, guying “the All Souls manner . . . staccato and a little lofty and severe, no harm in it but to tell you something about the speaker’s intellectual pretensions.” The Trillings considered retiring to Oxford, but in the end could not steel themselves to leave Columbia. Trilling’s loyalty to the College, which he always distinguished from the University, was unwavering. As he wrote to John Vaughan in an interesting autobiographical letter of 1972, he had enrolled at Columbia as a student partly to save money by living at home. The College, he felt, gave him his
liberal-democratic side to balance the conservatism of his parents. His most remarkable act of piety was to turn down an honorary Doctorate of Letters offered him by Columbia on his retirement, on the grounds that this would unfairly slight the work of other retired professors who had not received such an honor.

The last letter in Kirsch’s selection dates from five days before Trilling’s death. Dictated by his wife and signed by his secretary, it informs his cousin Bernard Cohen that inoperable pancreatic cancer has left Trilling terribly weak. His last essay, “Why We Read Jane Austen,” which he had not quite finished, appeared posthumously. His earlier writings on *Emma* and *Mansfield Park* had admired Austen’s ability to look with critical detachment at her own innate conservatism and to appreciate the increased complexity of moral decision-making by individuals in a society undergoing change. The last piece takes a more anthropological turn, but its message is essentially the same humanistic one: we read Jane Austen “to find in a past culture the paradigm by which our own moral lives are put to test.”

Trilling wrote essays on the letters of Keats, Joyce, and Santayana, remarking in the last on the widespread “emptiness and lack of energy” in other modern collections (he exempted those of D. H. Lawrence and Shaw). If he himself cannot be numbered among the great letter writers, it is not for those reasons; it rather is because, despite his admiration for poets, his mind lacks a poetic strand. His “negative capability” was not, as for his admired Keats, imaginative but ratiocinative. “Discourse,” his own word, best describes what he is drawn to, and what he does best. These are the letters of a man of singular probity and honesty, whose image as an austere, forbidding, somber character is not the whole truth. “He had a sweet heart,” Allen Ginsberg said, in tribute to his former teacher, “a sad solemn sweetness.” There is a salutary surprise in those words. For another less familiar side of his character, one can cherish the anecdote of a graduate class in which a student’s repeated references to “Lear” were cut short by Trilling with “King Lear to you!”

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**Paul Dean** is a freelance critic living in Oxford, U.K.

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