# *Lionel Trilling: Criticism and Politics* (review)

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cellent study is to review these issues in a full and formal analysis of Crane's art in the context of other nineteenth- and twentieth-century fictional styles. In this aim Professor Nagel succeeds admirably.

The first chapter of the book is concerned chiefly with backgrounds and general definitions. It reviews facts and conjectures about Crane's knowledge of Impressionist aesthetics and sets forth a full and notably precise analysis of its basic philosophical premises. The second chapter demonstrates the relation of Crane's narrative methods and devices to these principles, a thorough and discriminating essay on his artful use of the limited narrator, multiple narrative perspectives, uninterpreted sensory apprehensions by the central intelligence, and other such narrative devices and techniques. Chapter III shows how the idea of a shifting, uncertain, unreliable perception, a radical factor in the theory of Impressionism, underlies Crane's major themes of delusion, alienation, and self-discovery. The next chapter examines the relation of Impressionist themes and ideas to characterization, structure, and imagery, and the book concludes with a remarkably astute analysis of Naturalistic and Realistic elements in Crane and of the various ways in which he adapted these styles to the dominant principles of Impressionism. Unlike many students of Crane's style, Professor Nagel argues his case through the whole range of the author's work from minor sketch and story, early and late, to the major works. This wide-ranging selection of examples demonstrates clearly that the premises, themes, and techniques of Crane's fiction reflect a remarkably consistent and coherent vision of life. Professor Nagel's essay suggests that Crane's achievement is, in a sense, perhaps more remarkable than we might have thought, though the critic suggests this not so much by bringing new critical ideas to bear as by placing old ideas in a structured critical theory.

Crane's great and omnipresent subject was the scarcely bridgeable gulf between reality and man's imperfect perception of it. Profesor Nagel demonstrates beyond doubt that this Impressionist idea was central to Crane's vision, but he leaves it to the reader, alas, to puzzle over the writer's powerful and lasting commitment to it. The hallucinatory imagery, vision, and fantasy which dominates the anxious mentality of Crane's hero sprang no doubt from the author's own psychological and spiritual anxieties, perhaps from his own anguished sense of cultural and religious alienation. Professor Nagel's readers would no doubt have valued his ideas about this. One always wishes a good book to do more than it intends perhaps to do, but if there is a fault in this study it is that it does not venture to explain how or why the Impressionistic assumption of a shifting, obscured, and ambiguous reality stirred so powerfully Crane's deepest imagination.

Even so, *Stephen Crane and Impressionism* is a major contribution, one of the clearest, fullest, and most coherent and convincing descriptions of Crane's aesthetic yet to appear.

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Chase, William M. *Lionel Trilling: Criticism and Politics*. Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1980. 207 pp. Cloth:$12.95.

William M. Chace has chosen to study the changing connections between Trilling's literary and political ideas throughout his career. His sources are Trilling's published writings, from the early stories and *The Middle of the Journey*, through the study of Mat-

thew Arnold, to those superb collections of essays (*The Liberal Imagination, The Opposing Self, Beyond Culture, Sincerity and Authority*) which established Trilling as a dominant critic of his generation. Chace is not concerned with Trilling's origins and character, nor with the complexity of Trilling's position as both a Jewish professor at Columbia and a leader of New York intellectual opinion. Although Chace describes Trilling's published political attitudes in detail, he rarely relates those attitudes to the specific political events which may have caused them. We are thus provided with a disembodied biography of a great critical intelligence. Chace's presupposition is that Trilling's mind can and should be understood through analyses of the words Trilling chose to print. This presupposition results in an approach curiously at odds with its subject. We have a New Critical reading of the political and literary thought of a cultural humanist who intensely disliked the New Criticism.

Within these acknowledged limits, Chace's book succeeds admirably. Beneath Trilling's superficial change from 1930's radicalism to a rapprochement with the bourgeoise in the mid 1950s, Chace detects Trilling's continuing commitments to Freudian psychology, to Hegelian economic assumptions, and to an Arnoldian hope in the saving power of the intellectual middle class. The essential Trilling was a liberal so distrustful of liberalism that he perpetually criticized the liberal creed in order to strengthen it. Hence Trilling's faith in the middle class, yet his fear of its Phillistinism; hence his commitment to the free mind, yet his scorn for the liberal faith in social legislation and governmental planning. Trilling's desire to expose the naivete of liberal assumptions contributed to his troubling perception that nearly all the great modern masters (Eliot, Lawrence, Yeats, Joyce, Kafka, Proust) were fundamentally opposed to the assumptions of a liberal democracy. It was Trilling's greatness to have remained liberal in temperament while acknowledging that our lives are conditioned and limited and that the complexities of modern life and modern literature are as unresolvable as they are real. Our souls, Trilling always insisted, are created through opposition and not through joining. Alienation provides us the pain by which the self can be defined.

This is a plausible and complex reconstruction of Trilling's mind, one capable of absorbing seeming contradictions. It can explain, for example, why Trilling could have been so surprisingly condemnatory of Dreiser and yet so respectful toward James, whom Trilling credits with having, in James's phrase, "the imagination of disaster." In this manner, Chace continually draws persuasive connections between Trilling's literary judgments and political assumptions. Chace's finest insights, however, are his reflections upon Trilling's own methods. Consider Chace's description of the effect of Trilling's cultural vantagepoint upon his style:

> This style—urbane and lambent, but never rapid, never aggressive—mirrors the oddness of his being engaged with the aggravations of modernity though never tormented by them. This gracious, full style is not that of someone victimized by modernism, but that of someone who acknowledges the full range of modernism's pressures while remaining conscious of the means to escape them (p. 18).

Or consider Chace's way of accounting for the occasionally baffling evasiveness of Trilling's conclusions. The strategy of *Sincerity and Authority*, Chace concludes, is "to argue by means of an abstract terminology whose meaning is presumed to be accessible to everyone but that is actually something the author alone controls and whose separate units he introduces and partially defines as the appropriate occasions arise" (p. 147). Such conclusions can be reached only by someone who has lived long and thoughtfully with Trilling's essays.

The failing of Chace's book lies only in what he chose not to do. Grand cultural pronouncements can often arise from particular personal encounters, especially in the intellectual circles of Manhattan. Contemporary political events other than Stalinism may well have affected Trilling's darkening sense of liberal possibilities. And surely it is not unimportant that Lionel Trilling was the first Jew to be appointed to the English Department at Columbia. In her retrospective essay, "Lionel Trilling, A Jew at Columbia," Diana Trilling recalls an afternoon when Emory Neff, Chairman of the English Department, called upon the Trillings to say that he hoped Trilling's appointment would not be a wedge for the hiring of more Jews. About Trilling's involvement in all three of these areas (New York, political events, faculty relations), Chace provides us almost no information. Because all three may well have influenced the words Trilling left us, they will eventually have to be considered. In the meanwhile, however, Chace has happily provided us a fine study of the works themselves, one to which anyone interested in Trilling will wish to return.

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Ammons, Elizabeth, ed. *Critical Essays on Harriet Beecher Stowe.* Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1980. 307 pp. Cloth: $18.50.

It is hard to believe that a collection of essays on the work of Harriet Beecher Stowe can legitimately be described as *fascinating,* but such is the case. Ammons' collection includes reviews and essays contemporary with the 1852 publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as well as later essays; comments on Stowe's other novels (*Dred, A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp; The Minister's Wooing; The Pearl of Orr's Island,* and others); and a range of commentary on Stowe as writer. The collection closes with four essays grouped under "Reminiscences," among them pieces by William Dean Howells and Henry James.

The facets of Stowe's career are clearly drawn through the juxtaposition of materials: Her hesitant beginning as writer, with short stories that fit the local color designation; the always questioned fame after the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin;* her defenses against that derision (both sexist and religious, as well as racist); and her continued successes (and embarrassments) as writer.

Ammons' introduction, though brief, is informative about both personal and critical matters. Her style is succinct; it has to be because there is a great quantity of material to be discussed. Probably no American writer has so divided the critical world, and Ammons' assessment gives us some understanding of the vicissitudes of that critical profile. From George Sands' praise of her as "consecrated" to George F. Holmes' attacks on her "shameless disregard of truth and of those amenities which so peculiarly belong to her sphere of life," Ammons' selection of essays paints the canvass of taste coerced into cultural respectability which varied by age. One surprising note is that there was so much freedom, such allowance for the woman writer, in the mid-nineteenth century. Another surprising tendency is that toward closure of opportunity in the mid-twentieth century. But the most pervasive impression of these published opinions is the undervaluation of Stowe's work, regardless of the time comments appeared. One can only wonder at the real motives behind those critical comments that scoffed at "structure" and "sentiment."