COMMENT

Two Mid-Century Critics

Steven Faulkner

Placing these two books side by side, you see the two black-and-white photographs. In each, a man holds a lighted cigarette. On the dust jacket of Allen Tate's Essays of Four Decades, the poet, critic, novelist, Southern Agrarian rests his elbow on the arm of his wooden chair, holding the cigarette between thumb and forefinger. The smoke rises into darkness. Behind the seated figure are books, a couch, a 1950s desk lamp. A winter light falls through a trailing vine set near a window and onto the puckish profile of a man lost in thought. It is the image of a scholar at home.

On the dust jacket of The Moral Obligation To Be Intelligent, Lionel Trilling, Columbia professor, critic, novelist, self-styled "progressive liberal," has taken his cigarette to his mouth and is gazing solemnly into a middle distance, his hair white, his eyes dark, his expression contemplative. It is a face (using a description Trilling himself made of a photograph of Isaac Babel) "very long and thin, charged with emotion and internal-

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BOOKS DISCUSSED in this ARTICLE

Essays of Four Decades, by Allen Tate. Wilmington, Del.: ISIBooks, 1999.

Tate for at least two reasons. First, they predate much of the reductive folly that characterizes literary criticism in our time. In these two volumes, we see two scholars who still love literature for its proper purposes, who see good literature as a catalyst of careful thinking, who see poems and novels as means of understanding humanity, as an invitation to self-examination, as a quest for reality: "the look and feel of things, how things are done and what things are worth and what they cost and what the odds are," as Trilling puts it. More than this, literary criticism for Allen Tate is "the intelligence trying to think into the moving world a rational order of value."

A second reason to take up these two gifted critics is to see them take up arms against a sea of troubles. A half century ago, these critics were defending language itself, the value of universals, of moral discernment, of authorial intention. It is refreshing to hear Trilling say that his first concern was to discover "the animus of the author, the objects of his will, the things he wants or wants to have happen." It is encouraging to hear Tate defend poetry as a way of knowing, and words as a necessary completion of human experience. In a few cases, their battles have been won, in others they were fighting the initial skirmishes of later battles.

Perusing a book catalogue from the Modern Language Association or the offerings of a major university press, one sees immediately that the modern critic of literature is caught up in identity politics, gender wars, or various ideological conflicts—all of which are attempts to shape literature to one's own ideological agenda. Instead of being a pilgrim in quest of meaning and truth, the critic sets up as a kind of power broker. Tate saw this coming and called it intellectual pride, where the critic assumes a "dubious superiority to the work as a whole." "The critic," Tate argues, "will need all the humility that human nature is capable of, almost the self-abnegation of the saint...to expand and to elucidate, with as little distortion as possible, the knowledge of life contained by the word or the poem or the play." This is what both these critics sought, a complex and nuanced knowledge of life. For these two, literature was not reducible to history, politics, science, or theory. Literature is complex and often difficult because life itself is complicated; but a careful reading of a T.S. Eliot poem or a Henry James novel repays the reader with a better understanding of our society and ourselves.

Tate and Trilling have their differences. Tate was rather bored with politics, perhaps because he was primarily a poet who found the true usefulness of poetry "in its perfect inutility, a focus of repose for the well-driven intellect," whereas Trilling sees literature, since it is inescapably about morals, as having something to say to political and social life. Trilling defends, for example, George Orwell's confrontation of political life, but dislikes Hemingway's later efforts to become what we would call politically correct, and he detests Theodore Dreiser's late conversion to Communism.

Perhaps the most important difference between these two critics is that Tate saw the moral life, and therefore literature, as an appeal to transcendent truths, whereas Trilling doubts any appeal to the supernatural and therefore relies solely on intellectualism as his guide to understanding. This is a fundamental difference. The stream of intelligence is, of course, a means to understanding, but understanding what? Where do the springs of logic and rhetoric arise and to what sea do they flow? Tate argues that both source and end are beyond our temporal existence, that "the end of social man is communion in time through love, which is beyond time." For this reason Tate can find resources
in medieval theology and Neo-Thomism while Trilling sets his hope on intellect alone. Trilling finds, as his book of essays demonstrates, that mind alone can be a precarious refuge. But more of this later.

Both of these mid-century critics believed that literary works of the imagination were among the best ways of searching out the realities of human experience “in its multifarious, tendentious, competitive details,” as Trilling puts it. And Tate argues, “It is my contention here that the high forms of literature offer us the only complete, and thus the most responsible, versions of our experience.” Which bestows on good works of literature, and on these critics who illuminate them, a kind of timelessness. Let the cigarettes burn.

A good literary critic is not a political ideologue or policy wonk. A good literary critic is a guide, a light-bearer, a Virgil to a reading Dante, offering insights to another author’s work. As a perspicacious, and sometimes a puckish, guide, Allen Tate excels. Tate’s essay on Dante’s symbolic imagination is worth the price of the book. In his first paragraph, he sets out to examine a single image in the *Paradiso*, the image of light and its reflections—and specifically, aspects of Dante’s use of double imagery. Taking only segments of Dante’s use of this image (for a full treatment of Dante’s use of light alone “could lead us into complexities as rich as life itself”), Tate works out various reflective images—Beatrice’s eyes, her mouth, candles in a mirror—as they take Dante up to the three circles that lead to the Beatific Vision.

Tate’s argument is that Dante, like all good poets and novelists, begins with the common thing (he quotes Charles Williams): “the girl in the street, the people he knew, the language he learned as a child. In them the great diagrams were perceived; from them the great myths open; by them he understands the final end.” It is the common detail, the everyday action, that the poet uses to engage our attention and lead us to understanding. The symbolic imagination brings both ordinary detail and extraordinary vision together at the same time, so that the ordinary thing neither loses its own reality nor obscures the higher reality: the candle remains a candle while indicating aspects of divinity.

This is an argument Tate uses to good effect in his revealing discussions of Edgar Allen Poe and Emily Dickinson. “How does the moral intelligence get into poetry?” he asks. “It gets in not as moral abstractions but as form, coherence of image and metaphor, control of tone and rhythm, the union of these features.” The concrete details of form and image and metaphor reveal the moral abstractions. He uses Dickinson’s poem “The Chariot” as an example. It is a poem about death and immortality, but its figures are a gentleman driving a carriage, school children at play, “fields of gazing grain,” the setting sun, horses’ heads. “Every image,” Tate remarks, “is precise and, moreover, not merely beautiful, but fused with the central idea. Every image extends and intensifies every other.”

For the same reason, Tate asserts that Flaubert created modern fiction, though not, of course, all the fictional forms and structures of fiction. But Flaubert was the first to develop a “technique of putting man wholly into his physical setting. The action is not stated from the point of view of the author; it is rendered in terms of situation and scene. To have made this the viable property of the art of fiction was to have virtually made the art of fiction.” The common thing: the whirring of a lathe in a nearby workshop, the crackling of a piece of paper in the hand, the heavy heat near an attic window, render a scene in *Ma-
dame Bovary audible, tangible, actual. In making this technique available to the novelist and short story writer, the art of fiction, says Tate, finally catches up with poetry.

Tate uses a tangent of this argument for the necessity of the common thing in literature to explain Edgar Allen Poe's wild, obsessional stories and poems. Tate's description of what he calls Poe's "angelic imagination" provides as insightful an introduction to Poe as one could wish for; it should be required reading for all those high school teachers who can define a gothic novel and point out assonance and alliteration in "Annabel Lee," but have little understanding of what lies behind Poe's demonic wit.

The "angelic imagination" of Poe is a proclivity, says Tate, to live in a world of abstractions, divorced from common feeling. Tate traces this tendency to the "Cartesian split—taste, feeling, respect for the depth of nature, resolved into a subjectivism which denies the sensible world; for nature has become geometrical, at a high level of abstraction, in which 'clear and distinct ideas' only are workable." Thus, intellect and will overcome natural human feelings and man becomes, as Maritain said, "an angel inhabiting a machine and directing it by means of the pineal gland."

Cut off from reality, as Tate argues, Poe tries to "impose upon experience a mechanical logic. Unable to represent the world within the bounds of natural feeling and experience, a nightmare of paranoia, schizophrenia, necrophilism, and vampirism supervenes, in which the natural affections are perverted by the will to destroy." Poe's fundamental problem is his rejection of common life, a repudiation of the commonplaces of our incarnate lives.

Allen Tate, though a New Critic, does not in these essays completely dismiss the need to look at history or biography. He sees Poe as a "religious man whose Christianity, for reasons nobody knows anything about, had got short-circuited; he lived among fragments of provincial theologies...." In the same way, he sets Emily Dickinson distinctly within her time by pointing out her middle position between Hawthorne's struggle with Puritan theocracy and Emerson's advocacy of the independent soul capable of personal perfection. "There is Hawthorne looking back, there is Emerson looking not too clearly at anything ahead: Emily Dickinson, who has in her something of both, comes somewhere between."

As a New Critic, Tate might not admit he derived these historical placements from reading biographies or history books. His concentration was on the literature itself; he didn't think endless discussions of a poet's personality helped us understand a poem: "Poets are mysterious," he remarks, "but a poet when all is said is not much more mysterious than a banker.... Personality is a legitimate interest because it is an incurable interest, but legitimate as a personal interest only; it will never give up the key to anyone's verse." Nonetheless, within an author's works, especially when read as a whole, Tate was willing to find a personality, a philosophical approach, and placement within historical context.

In the same way, though Tate is usually identified as one of the Southern Agrarians, and he did strongly identify himself through his own novel and poems with the South, yet his view of the literature of the South was anything but complimentary. He did see real value in the South's attachment to the land, from whose cultivation the very word culture grows. "The South," says Louise Cowan in an excellent introduction to this volume, "offered a sense of the sacred along with an understanding of honor and pietas in a cultural vision that could be
expressed in myth and poetry.”

Tate believed that the literature of the South, at least before Faulkner, was sadly lacking. He saw this as largely a religious problem: “we do nothing without symbols and we cannot do the right thing with the wrong symbol.” This, he says, was due to the fact that “the South’s religious mind was inarticulate, dissenting, and schismatical. She had a non-agrarian and trading religion that had been invented in the sixteenth century by a young finance-capitalist economy: hardly a religion at all but rather a disguised secular ambition.” (So much for Protestantism.) Tate was still a quarter century away from his conversion to Catholicism when he wrote this, but he was already much concerned to cut away what he called the overgrowth from Southern society and get back to the roots of an older European tradition that could present the “common historical myth” and provide the right symbols for literature.

We see in these essays Tate as guide and illuminator. That was the work literary critics once aspired to. Other essays in this volume are more combative.

Tate hated the ascendancy of science as a method for explaining literature. He took Matthew Arnold to task for proposing the idea and did battle with those who would reduce literature to historical information, to logical positivism. “Hamlet,” he writes, “is not of the experimental order, but of the experienced order: it is in short, of the mythical order.” “Historicism, scientism, psychologism, biologism, in general the confident use of the scientific vocabularies in the spiritual realm, has created...a spiri-
gence.” Even his beloved literature has fallen prey to the experts. Bitter winds are blowing, and Trilling feels the chill. This is a remarkable essay, for Trilling’s consistent view throughout the length of his life, and in this book, was his confident assertion that intellect can lead us to right understanding and a solid moral basis for society.

In his last essays, Trilling notes the fragmentation of the humanities into scientifically understood divisions within the universities, teachers promoting “attitudes” rather than knowledge, a growing body of intellectuals divorced from the arts altogether, a rejection of the pleasure principle that stands, he says, both within humanism and Christianity as the basis of reason. He quotes a president of the Modern Language Association predicting that the teaching of literature in American colleges “is now virtually at an end, having lost all rational justification.” Troubled times indeed, especially for a man whose whole career found its basis in the utility of the mind in sorting through the thickets and confusions of human life.

A quarter century before, Trilling had believed he had reason to be hopeful. He had been encouraged by the rise of what he called “the intellectual and quasi-intellectual classes of contemporary America” that were pushing up from the bottom. High school teachers attended seminars, there was a new class of employment dependent on mind rather than muscle, universities were gaining in prestige, students seemed attentive. But this was 1952. By the 1970s he is taking up words against authors whose “regressive impulse” would promote a world where “the will is so thoroughly abrogated that life will virtually cease to have meaning except in its formal aspects.” These are fighting words for a man whose earlier work seems a long, quiet morning of congenial thought.

In those earlier years, there were disputes with Marxists and progressives who believed scientists alone “had the future in their bones,” but many of the earlier essays were the work of a suggestive and illuminating literary critic. Trilling works his way through Wordsworth’s “Immortality Ode” and makes a remarkable comparison between Wordsworth’s “wise passiveness” and that of rabbinical writings he had read in his youth. He defends T.S. Eliot’s argument that morality is at every moment a present end. He describes Keats through a play on the words geniality, genius, and gens. He argues that American novelists need to write from within the fabric of social and political life. He defends George Orwell’s search for truth. He examines Huck Finn’s moral passion. In all these early works, you see a careful mind at work; Trilling’s arguments are nuanced and balanced; they distinguish shades of meaning; he was a man for whom words were precious and precise, each word weighed by its own specific gravity.

But toward the end of his life, irrationalism has become an ideology. Insanity has become a supposedly sane response to an insane society. The rational mind is being discredited by the very academics who used to defend the power and efficacy of the word. All these things Trilling details, and he speaks of “a notable retraction of spirit, a falling off in mind’s vital confidence in itself.” He says, in his quiet way, that we have entered a time of shadows. Shadows only? Surely this is darkness itself, blinding darkness, darkness swept by the winds of chaos, a howling darkness of desiccating winter winds. Who can live in such a storm?

Beneath this pounding storm, Trilling goes on speaking in his careful, quiet way. “In describing some of the special vicissitudes which at the present time attend the right conduct of mind, it has not been my intention to suggest that
these, though disquieting, are overwhelming. I have not meant to say that mind, in Wells’s phrase, is at the end of its tether.” Perhaps not, but it must be admitted that it is a tough time indeed for a careful rationalist, a time when a man might well long for spring and sunnier days. For that reason I suggest that one should read Trilling’s earlier essays last. There at least one warms to the quiet light that an ordered mind casts upon good books. There we find sane discussions of Hemingway and Henry James, of Wordsworth and Keats, of Twain and Isaac Babel. There we find the literary critic acting as guide to works he loves.

There is a marked difference between the two black-and-white photographs depicting these two essayists, and this may serve to represent a critical difference between them. Light shines upon the foreheads of both men, but Lionel Trilling seems to be floating in an abstraction of light and darkness. A solitary mind. Allen Tate sits in a particular room, perhaps his own study. There are trees outside the window, a plant within, books on the shelf behind him, a couch on the floor, a picture on the wall; he is a scholar at home. And this is important. Allen Tate valued his roots in the American South, in a particular place, among a peculiar people, within a complex culture he loved but was willing to critique. From that grounding in the soil of Tennessee, in its Southern culture, in his friendships with other Agrarians and literary men and women, he came to argue for a high order of being where morality and art combine with religion in an organic whole that rises toward the “supra-temporal destiny” of man. In a sense, Tate begins lower than Trilling but ends higher; he starts with the soil and ends with the spirit.

Lionel Trilling floats in a middle range of mind and morality, of social life, psychological behavior, and politics. Because he does not rely upon the culture of his youth, and does not aspire to spirituality, he is content to cast light upon authors who themselves are undermining everything in which he seems to believe. While reading him, I kept asking, Why don’t you put up a fight? Why write so convincingly of James Joyce’s nihilism, persuasively of Nabokov’s lusting anti-hero, sadly of Santayana’s hopelessness, and not strike them down? How is it that a middle-class moralist admires a modern literature that advocates freedom from the middle class, freedom from society and its rules, and even self-destruction? At the end of “On the Teaching of Modern Literature,” he admits this is odd, but he leaves it there. He points out the fearful abyss, but he knows no bridge by which to pass on, for the mind alone cannot find the other side.

Allen Tate, sitting in that little study, has ground to defend and a base from which to fight. His view, regarding both literature and life, is essentially an incarnational one. The soul finds its being within the common light of an ordinary day, but its aspirations lift the soul toward Dante’s bright visions. Because he has this foundation and this hope, he stands against the alienation and nihilism of his age. He holds up his cigarette as if it were a torch.