
*THE MORAL OBLIGATION
TO BE INTELLIGENT:*

Selected Essays.

By Lionel Trilling. Edited by Leon Wieseltier. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 572 pp. \$35

The reappearance of these essays and the collection's confident (not to say intimidating) title bring to mind two features of the cultural landscape that have vanished since midcentury, when Trilling (1905–75) flourished as an essayist and Columbia University professor. The first is the level of prominence a critic could attain. Trilling came virtually to symbolize literary criticism to a broad public, and he lent his voice to everything from essays and textbooks to book-of-the-month clubs. The second feature, whose passing is more to be lamented, is the public status of literary criticism itself. It was, in Trilling's day, a mode of public and political discourse, a source of large lessons on how to live.

Many would say literary criticism itself forfeited this status by descending into balkanized academic doctrines and impenetrable jargon. Still, the gap left behind is large, and it can be measured in the continuous satisfaction, even exhilaration, that this collection brings. In his 1948 analysis of Henry James's *The Princess Casamassima* (1886), for instance, Trilling moves from a soaring discussion of the European anarchist movements of the novel's era to a meditation on the tension between high culture and the hunger for social justice, the implications of recognizing that "the monuments of art and learning and taste have been reared upon coercive power." His 1952 appreciation of George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) pinpoints the author's appeal to the traditional understanding of a "democracy of the mind," the notion that common sense can pierce political orthodoxies.

Piercing such orthodoxies was also, of course, Trilling's own great vocation. Much of his better-known work is political in this sense, including many of the essays in *The Liberal Imagination* (1950), which sought to put liberalism under the kind of "intellectual pressure," including pressure from literary

insights, that might ultimately strengthen it. These essays patiently pick apart contradictions in prevailing pieties without allowing the reader to pin down the critic's own overarching philosophy. In the introduction, Wieseltier, literary editor of the *New Republic*, calls Trilling "a distinguished enemy of his time." In a tradeoff that may be inevitable, the essays that most directly confront Trilling's time have somewhat less to say to ours.

Even so, one of the incidental pleasures of these essays is the cooling light they cast on the culture wars of recent years, particularly those aspects that have been linked ad nauseam to the 1960s. David Brooks's clever *Bobos in Paradise* (2000), for instance, loses much of its edge when the cultural innovation it claims to identify—the effortless merging of bourgeois and bohemian values by post-baby boomers—turns up under Trilling's lens in the classic 1961 essay "On the Teaching of Modern Literature." In 1952, decades before *Eurocentrism* became a fighting word, Trilling seeks to analyze where artists and intellectuals should look "now that they can't depend on Europe as a cultural example." Matters nowadays too polarized for rational discussion yield to the "strenuous" reading and rigorous analysis that, for Trilling, represented the moral response to literature and to life.

—AMY SCHWARTZ

SHAKESPEARE'S LANGUAGE.

By Frank Kermode.

Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 324 pp. \$30

Fourteen years separate Shakespeare's first tragedy, the fiercely explicit *Titus Andronicus* (1594), from his last, the fiercely difficult *Coriolanus* (1608), and in that interval something astonishing happened to the playwright and his audiences. The poet's powers grew, as did the audiences' capacity to absorb and appreciate his words. Shakespeare taught them to hear more acutely—quite simply, to hear more—and the instrument of that aural and intellectual expansion was his language. In this remarkably absorbing book, Kermode, an 81-year-old English scholar and critic, brings a lifetime of judicious reflection to tracing the course of the Shakespearean transformation.