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.

Shakespeare's language was of course English, and he possessed it as utterly as anyone ever has, as utterly, in fact, as it possessed him. And Shakespeare the dramatist used the language as a poet uses language. Those observations would once have been too self-evident to bear mention, but not any more, argues Kermode. He fears that we've lost sight of the poetry in the spate of critical studies focusing on Shakespeare's religion or sexual preference or business acumen. Whatever their incidental fascination, such topics are subordinate to the texts as dramatic poetry.

Kermode's approach is as straightforward and foursquare as his title. He considers roughly the first half of the Shakespearean corpus—the histories, tragedies, and comedies of the 1590s—in a single section of some 50 pages. He's eager to get to the years when the playwright's craft attained a higher level. The pivotal work for Kermode is *Hamlet* (1600), that great "bazaar" of a play—"everything available, all warranted and trademarked"—in which, he believes, the playwright offers the fullest exhibition of his powers. "In Shakespeare's plays, especially after 1600, say from *Hamlet* on," Kermode writes, "the life of the piece . . . is in the detail, and we need to understand as much of that as we can."

So Kermode attends to the poetic detail of 16 individual plays. He takes key passages from each—in particular, knotty and involved passages—settles their literal meaning, and suggests how they served Shakespeare's larger dramatic purpose, which was to make language present the complexity of character and motivation as it never had done before. Shakespeare's characters weigh "confused possibilities and dubious motives." They propose theories or explanations only to abandon or qualify them almost immediately. Their thoughts are rugged, intricate, even obscure, and only a new kind of poetry can do them justice. Kermode believes that much of the language was difficult even for the audiences who first heard it, but the playwright educated them to his genius even as he went on imagining and testing new possibilities.

Kermode is not afraid to admit that some passages still leave him baffled, and to argue that the poet sometimes loses his way. No one who wrote so much, he says, and for commercial purposes, could hit the mark every time. So anyone who has ever puzzled over an intractable bit of Shakespeare can take heart: The playwright may not have known exactly what he meant either, and what he meant, in any case, may not be worth the effort of excavating the sense from its muffling expression.

This would be a wonderful book at any time. It's all the more welcome now, when so much of what passes for literary criticism has the weight, the appeal, and (thank goodness) the staying power of carelessly emitted gas. Kermode honors his subject and returns us to the plays newly alert to their pleasures.

—James Morris

SILENT SCREENS: The Decline and Transformation of the American Movie Theater. Photos by Michael Putnam. Johns Hopkins Univ. Press. 102 pp. $39.95

Disused small-town and neighborhood movie theaters are to photographer Putnam what the decrepit churches and storefronts of the rural South were to Walker Evans: objects that, austerely photographed in their decline, can cause us to reflect. On what, though, I'm uncertain. Just as Evans's pictures were always too stark for mere nostalgia, Putnam's are a little too artless to transcend it. Putnam did, however, make me think about how changing values, changing technologies, and changing economic priorities are reflected first in our landscapes and then, perhaps, in our souls, which are ever yearning, not always appropriately, for the past.

As you study Putnam's well-composed and well-lit photographs of abandoned theaters, a pang for the lost past inevitably afflicts you. Even more saddening is his record of conversions—theaters turned into evangelical churches, bookshops, banks, restaurants, a swimming pool. As writer Molly Haskell observes in the best of the four brief essays included in this slender, handsome volume, the disappearance of the community theaters signaled "the passing of