

whenever possible on simple formulas and checklists that measure things strongly associated with a desired outcome. Dumb luck explains a lot more of life than most of us realize, so we must beware of our tendency to create narratives that conjure causality. Kahneman even dispenses advice on how to improve your

meetings: “Before an issue is discussed, all members of the committee should be asked to write a very brief summary of their position”; otherwise, whoever talks first and most will likely sway the others.

Most of us simply have no idea how illogical, impressionable, and downright inept we are when it comes to making judgments.

Kahneman observes that we are often disastrously content with the inadequate information before us, but he doesn’t address how we are to know when we have enough data to make a good enough choice. Humans must constantly assess whether the cost of searching—for new information or additional options—has become too high. Working at a newspaper, according to an old saying, involves making judgments about the world with too little time and too little information. The problem, unfortunately, is even worse in life.

DANIEL AKST, a contributing editor to *The Wilson Quarterly*, is the author most recently of *We Have Met the Enemy: Self-Control in an Age of Excess*, published earlier this year.

ARTS & LETTERS

Heroic Reader

Reviewed by Gerald Russello

TWENTY YEARS AGO, ASKING why Lionel Trilling mattered would not have seemed necessary. Trilling (1905–75) was a professor at Columbia University for four decades, author of *The Liberal Imagination* (1950) and other essential works of 20th-century criti-

cism, and an editor—along with poet W. H. Auden and historian and critic Jacques Barzun—of the popular Reader’s Subscription Book Club series in the 1950s. His influence was palpable. Although he left no disciples behind, critics such as Cynthia Ozick and neo-conservatives including Irving Kristol show his influence.

Yet, as Adam Kirsch notes in this concise study, Trilling is in danger of being dismissed or, worse, mocked. His emphasis on the canonical texts of English literature doesn’t jibe with our multicultural sentiments, and his conviction about the autonomy and privileged place of literature (specifically, the long-form novel) has struck many contemporary critics as schoolmarmish and passé. Books are dead; who needs literary critics, especially those who (in the view of Trilling critic Louis Menand) “worried too much about culture” and were raised in an environment permeated by Modernism and Marxism, neither of which has the cultural weight it once did?

To Kirsch, a well-known poet and essayist and an accomplished critic in his own right, these indictments oversimplify Trilling’s work. He places Trilling alongside figures such as Isaiah Berlin and Hannah Arendt as representing a liberalism committed to pluralism and difference. Unlike those two, Kirsch argues, Trilling advanced this liberal vision by engaging with literature rather than political philosophy or history.

Writing as a young man in the 1920s and ’30s, Trilling mouthed some of the anti-middle-class platitudes of the Left, and thought literature should be subservient to communist ideology. As he matured, however, he staked out the opposite positions in books such as *The Liberal Imagination* and, later, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972). Like his models E. M. Forster and Matthew Arnold, Trilling “tried to vindicate literature as a social good, while preserving its imaginative independence from utilitarian pressures,” Kirsch says.

Kirsch deftly untangles this intellectu-

WHY TRILLING MATTERS.

By Adam Kirsch.
Yale Univ. Press.
185 pp. \$24

al journey, freeing Trilling from the collective opinions of a generation. For example, contrary to the general view that *The Liberal Imagination* is a political book, Trilling explicitly made the liberalism alluded to in his title at once “an emotional tendency, a literary value, an intellectual tradition, and a way of being in the world,” Kirsch observes. Indeed, he makes a compelling case that the book reflects Trilling’s rejection of a simplistic equation of literature with ideology in favor of a nuanced liberal imagination suffused with “complexity and difficulty,” which the reader must confront in the great works of modern literature. Trilling’s liberalism, therefore, was an interior conversation—reader to author.

For most of his book, Kirsch makes a case for Trilling as an important historical figure, if not a figure of current importance. The Modernists who held the attention of Trilling’s contemporaries are largely without an audience today, and the agonized arguments over Modernism and communism among *Partisan Review* writers will fail to move a new generation to pick up Trilling’s books. But in the last chapter, which he titles “The Reader as Hero,” Kirsch cleverly pits Trilling against the still-influential critic Susan Sontag.

In the 1960s, Sontag opposed many of Trilling’s literary values in favor of an “erotics of art” that offered no standards with which to discriminate among artistic experiences; the emerging “one culture” she championed would be dedicated to “seriousness” as well as “fun and wit and nostalgia.” What Sontag did not anticipate was that this culture, in breaking down the boundaries between popular art and high culture, would transform art from something experienced internally to something to be consumed. Kirsch finds Sontag’s legacy in brand loyalties and commercial purchases: art as reflecting whom we want to be perceived as by others, rather than whom we are trying to become. Trilling’s unique encounter with the work of Henry James is superseded by Andy Warhol’s endlessly replicable soup cans.

Trilling long argued that the individual reader’s struggle with great literature formed character, and that the 1960s counterculture and the global capitalism it colonized replaced this struggle with a quest for external status markers. He regarded with alarm the same cultural shifts Sontag celebrated—until she eventually grew chastened at their destructive possibilities. Trilling’s enduring value, Kirsch concludes, is that despite the rise of a consumerist sensibility to replace the liberal self, his brand of “readerly heroism is always a possibility for those who believe in it.”

GERALD J. RUSSELLO is the editor of *The University Bookman*.

Where the Writers Live

Reviewed by Leonard Benardo

THE NEW YORK CITY BOROUGH of Brooklyn is one of the most ethnically diverse places on earth. Drenched in working-class iconography, from baseball’s fabled Dodgers to the 1970s television series *Welcome Back, Kotter*, it has

long been home to immigrants and the many other New Yorkers who can’t afford to live in Manhattan. It has scarcely been perceived as a hotspot for the cultural set. Yet over the past decade, much ink has been spilled charting the migration of writers to New York City’s suddenly fashionable destination. Some, such as the inimitable British novelist Martin Amis, have even come from across the pond. Few cultural critics have attempted, however, to put this development in historical perspective, a glaring omission given the rich diversity of Brooklyn’s literary tradition.

Blending literary and urban history, Brooklyn-based writer Evan Hughes assays these *longue durée* connections. Commencing with that rugged, empathic democrat, Walt Whitman, and following with a score of other character studies, including considerations of poets Hart Crane and Marianne Moore,

LITERARY BROOKLYN:

The Writers of Brooklyn and the Story of American City Life.

By Evan Hughes. Holt. 337 pp. \$17