

# **FREIE UNIVERSITÄT BERLIN**

**JOHN F. KENNEDY-INSTITUT  
FÜR NORDAMERIKASTUDIEN**

**ABTEILUNG FÜR KULTUR  
Working Paper No. 61/1993**

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**The Holocaust and the Construction of  
Modern American Literary Criticism:  
The Case of Lionel Trilling**



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Literary Criticism:  
The Case of Lionel Trilling

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I learned the Torah  
from all the limbs of my teacher.  
Lionel Trilling

No Jew and no Christian has a right to live and  
guide his actions as though the six million had  
not died in agony. For this thing did not hap-  
pen far away or long ago. ... It happened yes-  
terday; it has not ceased happening.  
Ludwig Lewisohn

The following essay is part of a study of the circulation of ethnic materials (in particular African American and Jewish American materials) in American literary culture. My focus in this paper is on the Holocaust and its place in the construction of modern American literary criticism. I am interested in moments when Holocaust materials appear in critical texts, not (as in Holocaust studies) as directly articulated subjects of discussion, but rather in their repression or displacement onto other issues. My claim is that much modern American criticism is Holocaust-inflected. Principally I mean by this that there exist in contemporary literary studies traditions of critical thought that can be understood as having been shaped by Holocaust events, either directly or indirectly, and that constitute responses to those events--even if those responses are rarely explicit and need to be teased out of the works under discussion. While some critical writing (the cultural criticism exemplified by Lionel Trilling, for example) can be understood as intentionally positioning itself in relation to the Holocaust, other critical enterprises (New Historicism/Americanism and Deconstruction, for example) may register a Holocaust consciousness only obliquely and inadvertently. Let me emphasize again that, in the cases of all of the critics I will be discussing, including Trilling, I am

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interested in what we might think of as a "silent" speaking about Holocaust realities--moments when the Holocaust both is and is not a subject of discussion. Accordingly, some of the questions toward which my investigation in this essay will tend are: how do we differentiate among different kinds of silent speaking? what are the consequences of such silent speaking in one or another of its varieties? and when and how and to what consequence do we hear or fail to hear this kind of speaking?

These questions are related to another subject I consider: the extent to which writers and critics either participate in the construction of culture or permit themselves (whatever their strategies of opposition) to be constructed by it. Whether, and where, and how, we place the Holocaust as one of the determinative events of recent history, will, I argue, affect our understanding of, and participation in, the paradoxical constructions of and by culture. Contemporary literary theories, such as New Americanism and Deconstruction, direct our attention to important areas of moral concern. They provide strategies for identifying and deconstructing power relations within culture and society. Neither of these critical schools, however, possesses a conceptual framework for either understanding or attempting to remediate the deeply ingrained antipathies (as between races and religions) that are not, per se, power-based. This is the kind of antipathy that, in one vast instance, recently (fifty years ago) expressed itself in the extermination of six million Jews. Confronting the facts of the Holocaust, I suggest, forces literary critical theory into painful ways of thinking. That such thinking is vital for the enterprise of literary criticism as such is part of my contention in this essay.

i. Pease, Crews, Trilling, or is it Matthiessen?, Dreiser, and Parrington: Marxism, Nazism, and the founding of American literary history

Let me begin by recording a moment in a recent critical conversation in which discussion of the Holocaust fails to emerge, even though its relevance to that conversation is quite inescapable. Responding to a review essay by Frederick Crews that is, among other things, a response to his own work, Donald Pease (1990) cogently summarizes the recent turn in American literary criticism away from Formalist (New) Criticism to what has come to be known (following Crews's essay) as the New Americanism. According to Pease, the post-war New Critics, yielding to the pressures of the World War and the Cold War, attempted to separate literature from politics. In so doing, they seriously neglected the sociopolitical contexts both of the American literary canon and of their own critical writings. The New Americanists, in Pease's view, have endeavored to recover that much maligned link between the political and the literary. They have done this largely by distinguishing between politics in the sense of a particular socioeconomic or political agenda, and politics, or ideology, in the sense of the larger belief system that informs any society or culture. Culture, the New Americanists point out, is ideological, even if a given culture (America, for example) defines itself through its rejection of certain ideologies, like totalitarianism or fascism.

Pease anchors his critique of New Criticism and its contemporary exponents in a particular moment in Crews's essay, when Crews turns his attention to the critical writings of Lionel Trilling. Pease (as New Americanist), in setting himself in opposition to Crews (as New Critic), constructs the issue between them in terms of an earlier opposition in American literary critical history. This is the opposition between F. O.

Matthiessen and Lionel Trilling, where, in Pease's view, the issue between Matthiessen and Trilling is Marxism. As Pease notes, Trilling's response to Matthiessen had to do primarily with Matthiessen's own response to the work of Theodore Dreiser, who, as Pease records, "had decided to join the Communist Party in August 1945" (6).

The question I raise is whether Marxism is the only, or even the primary, issue between Trilling and Matthiessen, or, for that matter, between Crews and Pease.

Before I venture an answer to this question, let me note several factors that help justify the direction of my inquiry. First of all, Pease is hardly alone in placing contemporary literary studies against the background of the second World War and designating Marxism, or, more precisely, the resistance to Marxism, as a major determinant of post-War literary culture. Myra Jehlen, for example, suggests in her introduction to the collection of New Americanist essays she edits with Sacvan Bercovitch that "the background for the criticism in this volume is not the twenties and thirties ... [when American literary criticism, in the New Americanist view, was still selfconsciously ideological], but the forties and fifties. This is a crucial distinction because the forties and fifties-- characterized first by war-inspired nationalism, later by the jingoism of the McCarthy period--essentially reversed the dominant ideological and cultural thinking of the twenties and thirties" (2). Jehlen's focus on "war-inspired nationalism" and the McCarthy period (the "Cold War consensus," as Donald Pease refers to it) is shared by other New Americanists (Russell Reising, for example) as well as critics of various other literary persuasions (Murphy, Vanderbilt, Denning; see also Pease's 1985 essay.)

Given the particular emphasis of the New Americanism on uncovering

lines of sociopolitical cultural bias (as, say, in relation to nineteenth-century fiction and the issue of slavery), one would think that in designating the second World War as a formative pressure on American literary studies, New Americanist criticism would necessarily have to deal with what was a major and unavoidable issue in this war: antisemitism and the Holocaust. To be sure, the Holocaust is often implicit in the New Americanist designation of World War II as the background for criticism of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s. Nonetheless, the events of the Holocaust are almost never made explicit (the Holocaust, as such, is usually not named), and even more rarely is the extermination of European Jewry put forward as a subject, among others, for direct consideration. When the Holocaust is named, it is almost invariably linked with other, related crimes and catastrophes of the War era. Three Americanists who in the course of their literary analyses do address the Holocaust directly are Mark Shechner, Mark Krupnick, and Gregory Jay. Even for them, however, the Holocaust pales beside the power of Marxism and the Communist Revolution as a factor in the construction of modern American literary culture. Even for "Jewish intellectuals in the years just following the Second World War," observes Shechner, "the shadows of 1936 (Spain, the Moscow show trials) and 1939 (Stalin's nonaggression pact with Hitler, the carving up of Poland) loomed even more darkly than those of the death camps in which six million Jews lost their lives" (8-9; cf. Krupnick, 97-98). For Jay the "background of the war" includes the Holocaust, but along with "Hiroshima and Nagasaki" (298); "Auschwitz with Hiroshima" (303).

At this juncture, let me state explicitly that I do not intend to put anyone on trial, especially not for something that might, in this context, all-too-sensationalistically be called antisemitism. I think of my own



interest in the (non)debate concerning the Holocaust in something of the same terms in which New Americanists have expressed their ideas concerning the slave/ race/ Indian issues in authors like Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe. In other words, I take New Historicist critical principles as legitimizing my own suspicions about what it means that a particular conversation is /is not taking place; and I worry all the more that it is/ is not taking place among a group of literary critics whose critical priorities seem to demand that such a conversation take place.

So I return to my question. What does it reveal about the development of American literary studies that in the Crews-Pease exchange the issue heard in Trilling's response to Matthiessen is Marxism? Further, how do we understand the emergence of Lionel Trilling as a key figure in the debate concerning the good/bad founders of American literary studies, especially given the fact that Trilling, despite his deep investment in American culture, is neither an Americanist nor a New Critic?

This latter fact about Trilling, that he is not a New Critic and that he even voices sharp objection to the New Critical enterprise makes the New Americanist response to him extremely puzzling, even more so when one considers that Trilling's ideas resemble no contemporary body of criticism more than that of New Americanism ("The Sense of the Past," LI 177-79). "What I understand by manners," Trilling explains, "is a culture's hum and buzz of implication. I mean the whole evanescent context in which its explicit statements are made" (LI 200). Culture, Trilling states somewhat later in his career, is the "unitary complex of interacting assumptions, modes of thought, habits, and styles, which are connected in secret as well as overt ways with the practical arrangements of a society and which, because they are not brought to consciousness, are unopposed in their

influence over men's minds" (SA 125). Trilling's definition of the relation between the literary text and culture anticipates the contemporary definition of ideology, as put forward, for example, by a critic like Sacvan Bercovitch. Ideology, writes Bercovitch, is "the ground and texture of consensus ... the system of interlinked ideas, symbols, and beliefs by which a culture--any culture--seeks to justify and perpetuate itself; the web of rhetoric, ritual, and assumption through which society coerces, persuades, and coheres" (PI 635). In a moment I will suggest how Bercovitch's criticism may differ from that of many New Historicists and New Americanists. These differences have something to do with Bercovitch's relation to Trilling. Nonetheless, Bercovitch's definition of ideology identifies a central assumption of New Americanist criticism generally.

Trilling does not, then, as the New Americanist argument against him would seem to suggest, place the writer/critic outside society, as if literature and culture were forces on one side of a power struggle, and politics and ideology forces on the other side. Trilling specifically rejects New Criticism for the same reasons that the New Americanists object to it, because it makes the text autonomous, outside the cultural complex in which it exists ("The Sense of the Past," LI 177-79 ). Like Bercovitch and others, Trilling is suspicious of what he calls the evanescent (Bercovitch calls it the "transcendental") contextualization of culture, by which both Trilling and Bercovitch mean the way in which culture appeals to something outside itself, to legitimize and authorize what are only, finally, the human workings of society. Therefore, Trilling shares with the New Americanists a commitment to a "hermeneutics of non-transcendence" (Bercovitch 1992), a dialectical apprehension and explication of culture through what Bercovitch (thinking perhaps of Wolfgang Iser) calls border-

crossings (1992). I will have more to say about this hermeneutics of non-transcendence later.

Still, there are differences between Trilling's form of cultural criticism and that of most of the New Americanists. In order to get at these differences let me pursue further Pease's objections to Trilling and Trilling's objections to Matthiessen. These several objections have to do with these critics' apparently differing definitions of "reality." According to Pease, Trilling desired a definition of reality (at least that kind of reality represented in the literary text) that would make it independent of politics; therefore, in Pease's way of thinking, Trilling rejected Matthiessen's sense of reality, which turns out to be Dreiser's and Parrington's sense of reality as well, because it seemed to Trilling politically over-determined. But, as I have already begun to suggest, and as Trilling makes clear in his essay entitled ("tendentiously," according to Pease) "Reality in America," he does not wish to separate politics and art. Instead, he wants to discover their relation.

It is because Trilling accepts the idea of literature as political that he does not, for example, object to Parrington's "lively sense of the practical, workaday world, of the welter of ordinary undistinguished things and people, of the tangible, quirky, unrefined elements of life," which Trilling considers Parrington's "best virtue." What Trilling resists in Parrington is the way in which "whenever he was confronted with a work of art that was complex, personal and not literal, that was not, as it were, a public document, Parrington was at a loss." Trilling describes the issue between himself and Parrington as follows:

There exists, he believes, a thing called reality; it is one and immutable; it is wholly external, it is irreducible. Reality being fixed and given, the artist has but to let it pass through him....It

does not occur to Parrington that there is any other relation possible between the artist and reality than this passage of reality through the transparent artist; he meets evidence of imagination and creativeness with a settled hostility, the expression of which suggests that he regards them as the natural enemies of democracy. (LI 1-3)

In thus limiting the definition of reality, Parrington, in Trilling's view, "stands at the center of American thought about American culture." This is exemplified for Trilling in the critical reception of Dreiser, especially by a critic like Matthiessen, whom Trilling otherwise admires:

This belief in the incompatibility of mind and reality is exemplified by the doctrinaire indulgence which liberal intellectuals have always displayed toward Theodore Dreiser, an indulgence which becomes the worthier of remark when it is contrasted with the liberal severity toward Henry James. Dreiser and James: with that juxtaposition we are immediately at the dark and bloody crossroads where literature and politics meet. One does not go there gladly, but nowadays it is not exactly a matter of free choice whether one does or does not go. Few critics ... have ever been wholly blind to James's great gifts ... And few critics have ever been wholly blind to Dreiser's great faults. But by liberal critics James is traditionally put to the ultimate question: of what use, of what actual political use, are his gifts and their intention? ... But in the same degree that liberal criticism is moved by political considerations to treat James with severity, it treats Dreiser with the most sympathetic indulgence. Dreiser's literary faults, it gives us to understand, are essentially social and political virtues. ... The liberal judgment of Dreiser and James goes back to politics, goes back to the cultural assumptions that make politics... If it could be conclusively demonstrated ... that James explicitly intended his books to be understood as pleas for co-operatives, labor unions [etc.] the American critic in his liberal and progressive character would still be worried by James because his work shows so many of the electric qualities of mind. ... [1] In the American metaphysic, reality is always material reality. (LI 8-10)

For Trilling a proof of a serious misstep in American literary criticism is Matthiessen's defense of Dreiser's novel, The Bulwark. Matthiessen, Trilling stresses, knows full well the limitations of the "Parrington line of liberal criticism." He is also hardly insensitive to the virtues of Henry James. "Yet Mr. Matthiessen," Trilling explains, "writing in the New York Times Book Review about Dreiser's posthumous novel, The Bulwark,

accepts the liberal cliché [of the Parrington line] which opposes crude experience to mind and establishes Dreiser's value by implying that the mind which Dreiser's crude experience is presumed to confront and refute is the mind of gentility ... [2]" (LI 12-15).

The issue between Trilling and Parrington/ Matthiessen/ Dreiser, I suggest, is not simply Marxism. It is certainly not whether or not texts are ideological or political. It is rather, the specific ways in which texts are ideological or political, and what a given way means for the relation between culture and specific political ideologies such as Marxism, fascism, and democracy. Trilling finds Matthiessen's defense of The Bulwark unacceptable because of its failure to recognize the full political dimensions of Dreiser's text. In Trilling's view, Dreiser's book is morally inadequate and even offensive, not (as Matthiessen anticipated the attack would be) because the novel's "renewal of Christianity" marks a "failure of nerve." Rather, Trilling objects to the book because it represents a "failure of mind and heart": "we dare not," Trilling writes, "as its hero does, blandly 'accept' the suffering of others; and the Book of Job tells us that it does not include enough in its exploration of the problem of evil, and is not stern enough" (LI 17). Matthiessen's willingness "undiscriminatingly" to defend the book on the same realist/materialist grounds that he defended Dreiser's earlier novels brings into focus what is for Trilling most deeply distressing about the "Parrington line of liberal criticism." This is the way in which it "establishes the social responsibility of the writer and then goes on to say that, apart from his duty of resembling reality as much as possible, he is not really responsible for anything, not even for his ideas."

It is this split between social and individual responsibility that

Trilling utterly rejects, the idea that the novelist's responsibility extended no further than accurately representing social inequalities and injustice, so that, in the end, he or she is "not really responsible for anything, not even for his [or her] ideas." For Trilling, following the Holocaust, Dreiser's bland acceptance of the suffering of others, in particular in a book with an expressly Christian message, signals a specific danger, especially since one of those "ideas" in Dreiser from which the liberal imagination had so blithely absolved him of individual moral responsibility also bore so directly upon Holocaust realities. I now supply the materials elided in [1] and [2] above:

[1] And if something like the opposite were proved of Dreiser [that he did not have social interests at heart] it would be brushed aside--as his doctrinaire anti-Semitism has in fact been brushed aside--because his books have the awkwardness, the chaos, the heaviness which we associate with 'reality.'

[2] It is much to the point of his intellectual vulgarity that Dreiser's anti-Semitism was not merely a social prejudice but an idea, a way of dealing with difficulties.

ii. Cultural conversations, hidden agendas, and the Holocaust: Trilling's definition of the opposing (i.e., aversive) self

The "hidden agenda" of The Liberal Imagination, suggests Steven Marcus, is Trilling's attack on Stalinism (266). I suggest that, if there is a hidden agenda in this book, it is as much the confrontation with antisemitism and the Holocaust.

I will not here go into the details of Trilling's Jewish background, except to say that it is hardly minimal and that his early career as a student at Columbia provides ample evidence of his Jewish concerns. (For evaluations of Trilling's Jewishness--or lack of it--see Dickstein, Shechner, Krupnick, Klingenstein, and Kazin.) What is relevant to my argument

here is the way in which Trilling recurs throughout his writings--though with a certain reserve--to moments of antisemitism within the western literary tradition, even where the ostensible subject of a given essay hardly dictates that he refer to matters of Jewishness at all. Aside from the two Dreiser examples I have already cited, there is, for instance, Trilling's taking note of Henry Adams's "hateful" "anti-Jewish utterances" (GF 117) or his reference to the antisemitism of Santayana (GF 155) or his comment on Joyce's objections to another writer who was antisemitic (LD 46). There are also, of course, Trilling's more sustained attentions to antisemitism and Jews, not only in some of his early fiction, but, for example, in his afterword to the republication of Tess Slesinger's The Unpossessed (reprinted LD 11-14), his essay on Isaac Babel (BC), "Wordsworth and the Rabbis" (OS)--this essay on Wordsworth might well be taken as Trilling's oblique declaration of Jewish identity--and his review of C. Virgil Gheorghiu's The Twenty-fifth Hour. In that review Trilling writes: "Far from forcing upon us an appalled realization of the dreadful-ness of the recent past, it leads us to ask whether things were not really much worse than Mr. Gheorghiu says they were. This is in part the result of a literary inadequacy, but it is also the result of an inadequacy of moral sensitivity; one reason Mr. Gheorghiu's picture of the European horror falls short of the truth is that it deals in so minimal and perverse a way with the extreme example of that horror, the fate of the Jews" (GF 80).

I do not want to exaggerate the number of Trilling's direct references to Jews, antisemitism, and the Holocaust. Given the quantity of writing that he produced during his career, the number of such explicit references is relatively small. These references, however, such as they are, permit us to glimpse an element in Trilling's cultural project that might other-

wise vanish from view. This element, which (because of the enormity of the events of the second World War) I am calling Trilling's Holocaust inflection impels Trilling's resistance to the Parrington line of liberal criticism. Antisemitism and, later, the Holocaust forced Trilling to see that the "Jewish Question," as Marx referred to it, was not easily susceptible of a "solution" through either Marxist theory or practice.

The failure of Marxism adequately to address antisemitism, Trilling was well aware, could be understood in several different ways. The most obvious of these was that a phenomenon like antisemitism, or racism or sexism, might simply not be referable to economic realities or simple power relationships, but might represent a deep-seated, non-socioeconomic, hatred of one human being for another. The disillusionment of many African Americans with the Communist party in the 1940s, which forms a central feature in the fiction of writers like Richard Wright and Ralph Waldo Ellison, and the movement of African American literature away from realistic modes of representation in the contemporary period, tell their own story, I think, of the failure of Marxism adequately to address racism. That story emerges as well, I maintain, in a slightly different telling of it, in Trilling's criticism and in the subsequent inheritance of that criticism in the 1960s and '70s. Alfred Kazin puts the case of the Jew and the Communist party very directly: "the Jews had been ruled out of existence by the Nazis and could not be admitted into the thought of those who were fighting Hitler. The Jews could not be fitted into Nazi or Communist schemes" (27). Trilling's writings, I suggest, forcefully address the story of this exclusion. Kazin is not alone in missing the telling of this story in Trilling. "Like all of us old liberals," Kazin remarks, "the Trillings lived on the edge of the abyss created in modern culture, in all



our cultured minds, by the extermination of the Jews. The case of Alger Hiss seemed easier to deal with. He was a proven liar" (194). Trilling, I suggest, was neither the anti-Marxist nor the "non-Jewish Jew" that people thought him to be (the term non-Jewish Jew is Isaac Deutscher's, revived by Mark Shechner). Trilling's writings are subtly pervaded by a Jewish consciousness; and they are characterized not by an economically or politically motivated refusal of Marxism, but by an awareness of the degree to which Marxist thinking had very little light to shed on, or remedy to offer for, racism and antisemitism.

But there are other, more complex, reasons for Trilling's resistance to Marxism as a "solution" to antisemitism. And these go to the heart of Trilling's Holocaust consciousness and the literary-critical poetics that emerged in his writings as a consequence of that consciousness. In order to get at these other reasons, let me turn for a moment to another critical conversation concerning Trilling, Marxism, and the Holocaust.

For Gregory Jay, as for Pease, Trilling is a pivotal figure in the debate between the New Critics and the New Historicists. But whereas Pease emphasizes Trilling's opposition to Marxism and hence his complicity with the New Criticism, Jay, in the name of Deconstructionism, recalls Trilling's vehement opposition to the New Critics and, going behind Marx, recovers Trilling's relationship to Hegel (making Trilling, from Jay's point of view, the true Marxist--297). In Jay's interpretation Trilling provides an important alternative to New Historicist/ New Americanist directions in literary criticism. "As an 'other'--Jew, Freudian, Marxist" (297), struggling both to assimilate to the "authority of Anglo-European high culture" and to maintain "his allegiance to an 'otherness'" (297), Trilling, argues Jay, comes closer than the New Historicists to realizing

the historicism of dialectical Hegelianism. "The modernist 'tragic vision' Trilling offers in the wake of liberalism's paradoxes and failures," writes Jay, "focuses on the view that 'the world is a complex and unexpected and terrible place which is now always to be understood by the mind as we use it in our everyday tasks.' Set against the background of the war, the Holocaust, and Hiroshima and Nagasaki, these rather deceptively simple words take on considerable resonance. The special cognitive virtue of the literary, according to Trilling, is its dialectical power to reopen the complexities foreclosed by ideologies" (298).

But, in Jay's view, Trilling regretably swerves away from his Deconstructionist position. This swerve has to do, Jay suggests, with Trilling's idea of a "self" (what Jay earlier calls "consciousness"). Here is Jay's indictment of Trilling, gentle yet decisive:

Hegel's text becomes a pretext in Trilling for affirming the ontological reality of the 'performed' self, the written subject, who thus recovers from the inauthenticity of repetition and the impotence or errancy of action. ... The threatened disappearance of the modern self ... is remedied [by Trilling] by postulating an ontological and referential determination of writing by selfhood. ... Style is freedom, choice, and responsibility, and Trilling can thus theorize the cohesion of the moral and the aesthetic judgment. ... Efforts to move past the antinomies of his criticism, and of the tradition he belonged to, require a thinking of the dialectic of the literary and the historical that does not subordinate itself to either a deterministic narrative of the subject's subordination to Power or an idealistic tale of the achievement of an Absolute Freedom for Consciousness. It can only be historical, and political, if it remembers that history is a way of being that cannot simply be referred to. Our responsibility is rather to rewrite it, though it cost us our "I"'s in the process. (302-12)

As a Jew in a post-Holocaust world, Trilling, I maintain, considered Jay's proposed "cost" of forfeiting the self an impossibly high price to pay. Trilling's personal commitment to a personal self, which Trilling in "Wordsworth and the Rabbis" identifies as Wordsworth's commitment to being, distinguishes Trilling's Jewish, Holocaust consciousness. For Jay, as for

the New Americanists, the primary victims of American New Criticism were those many "others" (285) whom New Critical poetics eliminated from the literary canon. Therefore, in his own telling of the story of American literary history in the twentieth century, Jay retrieves Trilling as an "other" (297). What Jay will not grant Trilling, however, (as he will not grant it to African American critics who have had similar difficulties with Hegel and his racism) is the specificity of Trilling's otherness: his Jewishness. It is worth noting in this context (though I would resist making more of this than it is worth) that Jews are not among the "empirical others, such as Native Americans, women, and blacks" whom Jay cites in his list of American "others" (285). Nor is it irrelevant, as I mentioned earlier, that when he cites the Holocaust as a pivotal event of the second World War, one which inevitably shaped Trilling's thinking, he couples it with Hiroshima and Nagasaki (298; Auschwitz with Hiroshima--303).

I do not wish to be mistaken here. The catastrophes at Hiroshima and Nagasaki are horrifying events of recent human history. They are just as deserving of our sustained critical and moral consciousness as the events of the Holocaust. Similarly, it is an important fact about Hitler's Nazism that he exterminated gypsies and homosexuals as well as Jews. But the devastation at Hiroshima and Nagasaki is different from the devastation at Auschwitz; and the relationship between Nazism and the Jews is different from the relationship between Nazism and gypsies and homosexuals. It has become, in the contemporary period, a common feature of discussions of the Holocaust (where they occur) to link the Holocaust with other tragedies of the Hitler period. This diffusing of the consequences of the Holocaust occurs, for example, in William Styron's Sophie's Choice, in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon, in Leslea Newman's "A Letter to Harvey Milk," and

in the poetry of Sylvia Plath.<sup>2</sup> In erasing the differences among moral violations, these writers, I think, for all the value of their writing, do at least one kind of violence to moral thinking. They effect, inadvertently perhaps, a further erasure of the Jews. New Americanist and Deconstructive criticism frequently have something of the same effect.

For Trilling the "I" that he is unwilling to relinquish to a full historical dialecticism is hardly simplistic. In fact, in Sincerity and Authenticity (his last and most Hegelian text) Trilling, working through the ideas of Raymond Williams and others, formulates an idea of self-fashioning suggestive of Stephen Greenblatt's later evolution of this concept. For Trilling, as for Greenblatt and many New Historicists, identity is a socially mediated construct. Nonetheless for Trilling there exists an "I" that is, as Trilling puts it, "justified its elementary biological simplicity." This, according to Trilling, was the wise counsel of Wordsworthian poetry. Wordsworth, writes Trilling, did more than teach us how "to feel." He "undertook to teach us how to be ." "What does it mean when we say a person is?" Trilling asks, as he leads into a reading of Wordsworth's "Idiot Boy" ("Wordsworth and the Rabbis," OS 136-37): "Again and again in our literature, at its most apocalyptic and intense, we find the impulse to create figures who are intended to suggest that life is justified in its elementary biological simplicity, and, in the manner of Wordsworth, these figures are conceived of as being of simple status and humble heart: Lawrence's simpler people... Dreiser's Jennie Gerhardt ... Hemingway's waiters .... Faulkner's Negroes ... and ... idiot boys" (150).

Given that Trilling is writing "Wordsworth and the Rabbis" in the years immediately following the war, it is not difficult, I think, to understand Trilling's emphasis on the idea of "being," or to discover what

motivates Trilling to associate the contemporary rejection of Wordsworth's poetry with a particular and vicious historical phenomenon: "the quality in Wordsworth that now makes him unacceptable," Trilling specifies, "is a Judaic quality" (123). Nor are the reasons for Trilling's particular formula for distinguishing between this elemental being (human beings in their biological simplicity) and the evolution of a morally responsible self particularly obscure. He writes:

How was a man different from an individual? A person born before a certain date, a man--had he not eyes? had he not hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? If you pricked him, he bled and if you tickled him, he laughed. (SA 24)

For Trilling, the Holocaust necessitated thinking, not simply about social injustice (as Marxism had undertaken to do) or about undoing ideology (as in dialectical Hegelianism, as it has been evolved by Deconstruction), but about the very definition of the human--the person, the human being, in Trilling's specific case, the Jew.

It is not irrelevant to Trilling's relationship to Marxism that of the major figures who created modern culture, Marx was certainly one of the more virulently antisemitic--though, of course, T. S. Eliot, standing in various ways behind the New Criticism, and Hegel and Heidegger, standing behind Deconstruction, are tainted in similar ways. Nonetheless, this does not release us from the necessity of considering, in the case of Marx as in the case of all of these figures, how, precisely, we want to understand their antisemitism in relation to the cultural circulations in which they took part and which may, indeed, put that circulation beyond, say, a merely Marxist or Hegelian understanding. For Trilling, Marxism must necessarily fail before the threat of antisemitism because, like Nazism, it imagined the "Jewish" as a "Question" in need of a "solution" or removal: "Let us

look at the real Jew of our time," writes Marx in A World without Jews (part one was published as The Jewish Question); "not the Jew of the Sabbath ... but the Jew of everyday life. What is the Jew's foundation in our world? Material necessity, private advantage. What is the object of the Jew's worship in this world? Usury. What is his worldly god? Money. Very well then; emancipation from usury and money, that is, from practical, real Judaism, would constitute the emancipation of our time" (37).

From Trilling's point of view, Marx's solution to the Jewish Question was only marginally better than Hitler's. He demanded the disappearance of the Jew as Jew, as of the Christian as Christian. (As Ludwig Lewisohn puts it, "the world's peoples wanted us to be emancipated not as ourselves from from ourselves" --13). But what if (for whatever reasons) Jews and Christians did not wish to disappear? One is reminded here of a statement made by Toni Morrison concerning African American identity. Until the contemporary period, she suggests, race made all the difference in the world to white society. Now that African Americans have claimed that difference as their own, imbued it with power and beauty, race, according to the white world, makes no difference at all. With regard to Trilling's dissatisfaction with Marxism, we might say, similarly, that Marxism made no provision for Jewish difference, for the self-declared otherness and identity of a people, who might wish to exist and live as a distinct people.

Marxism made no provision, as well, for an individual who might wish to exist and live in his or her private human being. This question of Marxism and the individual returns me to Trilling's critique of the Parrington line of liberal criticism. To imagine reality as exclusively "material" (which is to say, socioeconomic), and to imagine, further, the text as a transparency reproducing this reality was, from Trilling's perspective,

exactly not to acknowledge the writer/critic's place within the construction of culture and, therefore, his or her moral responsibility within it. It was instead to exempt the writer/critic as standing somehow outside culture, as if she or he could, or should, do no other thing than render the world back to itself. In fact, from Trilling's point of view, the Marxist definition of literary criticism doubly distanced the writer/critic from culture. In the first place, the material theory of reality declares that morality is not the province of writers to define but exists in a transcendental place outside culture (in the case of Marxist criticism, it rests with Marxist economic and political theory). In the second place, it makes the function of writers to reflect or reveal societal ills as functions, not of the writers' self-perceptions and self-incriminations, but of timeless and universal metaphysical truths about culture.

After the Holocaust, Trilling was not so willing to give up either on the idea of individual being or on personal moral responsibility. This is so, not because the individual moral self epitomized for Trilling a metaphysical or religious truth beyond or outside culture to which culture might appeal and make itself accountable. Quite the contrary. Since, in Trilling's view, there is nothing outside culture to which culture can apply, and since culture is only a human construction, human beings must individually assume ethical responsibility. I will not broach here the complexities of Trilling's definition of the self, which I discuss elsewhere, in a reading of Trilling's "Wordsworth and the Rabbis." I will, however, note that by an "opposing self" Trilling does not mean an essentialist, unitary identity (which stands in an oppositional, outsider, relationship to society, which then constitutes the non-self or, in contemporary terms, the other). Rather, he means a self that is definable by

its relationship to other selves, within the context of culture. From the point of view of the self, these other selves do possess definitive identity. It is Trilling's hope that in a moral society every self will accord, and also be accorded, this courtesy of imagining others, and not itself, as possessing essential identity. Thus for Trilling, in "Wordsworth and the Rabbis," Wordsworth is not Christian but non-Jew, while Trilling is not Jew but non-Christian. Trilling's ideas here bear strong affinities to Stanley Cavell's idea (recently given important, new, treatment in his Harvard-Jerusalem lectures) of the "aversive" relationship between individuals within society. This relationship, as expressed by Emerson, for example, so ties together individuals within society as to transform opposition or the turn-away-from (aversion) into a turning-toward or engaging of others within the shared world of culture ("Aversive Thinking"; Trades of Philosophy: Harvard-Jerusalem Lectures).

In ways similar to the thinking of the New Americanists, for Trilling culture is a non-transcendent place. Cultural criticism, therefore, constitutes for Trilling what Bercovitch (as I have already noted) calls a hermeneutics of non-transcendence. For Trilling and Bercovitch both such a hermeneutics of non-transcendence empowers rather than limits human authority, and it is here that the Trilling-Bercovitch line of cultural criticism separates from other branches of the same family. In a recent reflection on his own development as an Americanist, Bercovitch makes the point as follows:

America was more than a figment of the imagination, an imperial wish-fulfillment dream brought to life in the assertion of nationhood. It was a way of imagining that expressed the mechanisms through which the made-up becomes the made-real. ... The music of America ... sounded to me like ideology, but it was ideology in a new key, requiring a blend of cognitive and appreciative analysis. Benjamin contrasts empathic understanding with historical



materialism, an adversarial outlook of 'cautious detachment' which, aware of the 'origin' of culture, "cannot contemplate [its subject] without horror." I sought a mode of mediation between horror and empathy.

Inspired by but resisting Walter Benjamin, Bercovitch searches for a place where individuals exist, neither outside culture nor hopelessly locked into it, but in a creative, meaning-making and, equally important, responsibility-assuming place within it. The discovery of this place of meaning-making and moral responsibility is, I suggest, exactly Trilling's aim, and it marks the specific Holocaust-inflection of his writing. For if, as Trilling and Bercovitch both argue, we are always within the cultural moment we would decode, then how we place ourselves in relation to our society may not represent a choice between opposition to or implication in it. Rather it may decide whether we will help construct the major issues of our time, or merely be constructed by them.

#### Silently speaking dissent in America

At the beginning of this essay I noted that my concern here is not in examining direct literary-critical confrontations with the Holocaust, but, instead, with locating moments of what I called "silent" speaking about the Holocaust. The power of Trilling's writing derives, I believe, from the ways in which it manages such silent speaking--the ways, that is, in which Trilling's texts give us just enough signalling to turn us toward a contemplation of the Holocaust without making the Holocaust the exclusive subject of his investigation. In thus approaching the Holocaust as part of his interest in the activity of cultural construction, Trilling, I suggest, enters into a tradition of American authors (among them Emerson and Thoreau, Hawthorne and Melville) who also addressed the major social issues

of their time obliquely. Their reasons for such ideological indirection, like Trilling's, had to do with their recognition of a hermeneutics of non-transcendence. For Trilling, Hawthorne, and an entire tradition of American authors, the fact of our always being inside the culture we would critique required that we abandon moral-system-making for a less glamorous, more arduous kind of activity. This is the never-completed process of rearticulating our respect for "being."

In defining Trilling's silent speaking in this way, I intend to differentiate it from other forms of what could also seem to be Holocaust-inflected silence. I am thinking here, for example, of the writings of Paul de Man, particularly as they have been defended by Geoffrey Hartman, Shoshana Felman, and Jacques Derrida. Trilling's cultural criticism, as I tried to demonstrate in my discussion of Jay, is not literary Deconstruction. Even if we grant the embeddedness of de Man's silence in the selfconsciousness of Deconstruction, Trilling's silence is not de Man's. Nonetheless, Trilling's silent speaking raises problems. The very fact that sensitive contemporary critics (like Pease) do not hear Trilling's discourse as a speaking about antisemitism and the Holocaust (as generations of readers did not hear the subject of slavery silently spoken in the writings of Emerson, Thoreau, and others), raises inevitable questions about Trilling's critical project.

In a recent essay on Emerson, Stanley Cavell has analyzed Emerson's apparent silence (at least in his major philosophical essays) on the subject of slavery. Cavell understands this silence, in particular in "Fate" but in "Self-Reliance" as well, as part of Emerson's effort to separate polemics from philosophy and to constitute and preserve philosophy as that which constitutes and preserves human freedom. Yet, reading back through

Heidegger's evolution of Emerson's thought as that thought was mediated by Nietzsche, Cavell wonders whether philosophy has not been tainted by its silences, in relation both to slavery and to Nazi antisemitism. Cavell's comments, I suggest, usefully apply as well to other nineteenth-century authors, such as Hawthorne, Melville, and Thoreau, who also did and did not speak to the subject of slavery. These comments illuminate the case of Lionel Trilling as well.

It is not difficult to understand why Trilling hesitates in speaking directly about the Holocaust. He is resisting sensationalistic discourse, the kind of language that, in Trilling's view, characterizes, and compromises, what he calls the "intense social awareness" of twentieth-century American fiction. Modern fiction, Trilling acknowledges, rightfully concerns itself with "the situation of the dispossessed Oklahoma farmer and whose fault it is, what situation the Jew finds himself in, what it means to be a Negro" (208). But modern fiction is also, in his view, given to irresponsible, exploitative, and ultimately dangerous rhetorical excess. The "extreme" instance of this excess that Trilling cites is a novel by John Dash, which has "attracted a great number of readers ... because of its depiction of Nazi brutality" and the "stark realism" of its "torture scenes." Trilling's objection to this book has to do with the way in which "pleasure in ... cruelty is protected and licensed by moral indignation." For Trilling the task of literature is not to confirm some simple definition of morality. Rather it is to examine what "lie[s] behind our sober intelligent interest in moral politics":

I have elsewhere given the name of moral realism to the perception of the dangers of the moral life itself. Perhaps at no other time has the enterprise of moral realism ever been so much needed, for at no other time have so many people committed themselves to moral righteousness. We have the books that point out the bad conditions,

that praise us for taking progressive attitudes. We have no books that raise questions in our minds not only about conditions but about ourselves, that lead us to refine our motives and ask what might lie behind our good impulses. There is nothing so very terrible in discovering that something does lie behind. (LI 213; recall here Trilling's objection to Dreiser's The Bulwark, that "it does not include enough in its exploration of the problem of evil, and is not stern enough"--LI 17)

In avoiding directly political language and in pointing the moral question toward the examination of what lies behind our morality, Trilling resembles no earlier critic of American culture more than Emerson, as when Emerson writes in "Self-Reliance":

Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist. He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness. ... If malice and vanity wear the coat of philanthropy, shall that pass? If any angry bigot assumes this bountiful case of Abolition, and comes to me with his last news from Barbadoes, why should I not say to him, "Go love thy infant; love thy wood-chopper, be good-natured and modest; have that grace; and never varnish your hard, uncharitable ambition with this incredible tenderness for black folk a thousand miles off. Thy love afar is spite at home."<sup>2</sup>

Like Emerson (and others in the American tradition), Trilling would get behind goodness to explore whether it be goodness, and why. But the powerful silence of Trilling's speaking does not, in his case any more than in the case of the nineteenth-century American writers vis-a-vis slavery, remove the objection that in speaking silently Trilling inadvertently may have conspired in the erasure of Jewish consciousness and memory, which is to say, in the erasure of the Jew.

Such silent speaking as Trilling practices places us on the horns of a dilemma. The solution to this dilemma cannot be a reversion to direct political rhetoric, because such a reversion would only represent silence of a different kind--the silent refusal to hear the variety of moral discourse that Trilling and his tradition write. This dilemma returns us to the conversation between Crews and Pease, which is to say between New

Criticism and New Americanism. Contemporary Americanist criticism faults New Critical readings of nineteenth-century texts for failing to locate the sociopolitical issues that generated those texts. Yet by failing to locate the sociopolitical issues--in all their nuance and detail--that generated the New Critical readings (including the cultural criticism of Lionel Trilling) New Americanists risk replicating, not silent speaking, but--at least in relation to Jews and the Holocaust--silence itself.

## NOTES

1 In a recent remake of Ernst Lubitsch's To be or not to be, to take an example from popular culture, Mel Brooks makes the victims of Nazi oppression equally gypsy, homosexual, and Jew.

2 Note the following statement by Quentin Anderson: "We have not ... paid any attention to Trilling's urgent warning that the characteristic political mode among intellectuals masks our impulses from our awareness .... It was not Lionel Trilling who abandoned the politics of liberal democracy .... It was Trilling's contemporaries who, by their refusal of the human condition, and their love affair with an authoritarian politics ... proceeded to charge Trilling with disloyalty to apocalypse. The quality of a democracy is to be measured not simply by its formal extension of rights to all, but by the capacity of its citizens to extend recognition to the full personhood of their fellow citizens. Our love of pattern and abstraction does not help us to extend this recognition, and it is disabling rather than useful when we are struggling with immediate questions like the impersonal power of such structures as oil companies and banks" (261-64).

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