

Lionel Trilling's Existential State

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Death is like justice is supposed to be.

Ralph Ellison, *Three Days Before the Shooting*

IN 1952, LIONEL TRILLING ANNOUNCED THAT “intellect has associated itself with power, perhaps as never before in history, and is now conceded to be in itself a kind of power.” He was describing what would be his own associations: his personal papers are littered with missives from the stars of postwar politics. Senator James L. Buckley admires his contribution to American letters. Jacob J. Javits does the same. Daniel Patrick Moynihan praises him as “the nation’s leading literary critic.” First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy writes from the White House, thanking him for the collection of D. H. Lawrence stories and hoping to see him again soon. Three years later, President Lyndon Johnson sends a telegram asking Trilling to represent him at the funeral of T. S. Eliot. Politicians liked having Trilling around. He confirmed their noble sense of mission as often as they praised him.¹

Trilling’s accommodating relation to power alienated many of his peers, like Irving Howe and C. Wright Mills, and later provoked condemnations from historians like Christopher Lasch and

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¹ Trilling thought that the political establishment embraced intellectuals because it was “uneasy with itself” and eager “to apologize for its existence by a show of taste and sensitivity.” Trilling, “The Situation of the American Intellectual at the Present Time,” in *The Moral Obligation to Be Intelligent*, ed. Leon Wieseltier (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000), 280–81; hereafter cited in text as *MO*. Just after Trilling’s death in 1975, the acutely status-conscious Tom Wolfe declared him “probably the most prestigious literary critic in the country.” Wolfe, *Mauve Gloves and Madmen, Clutter and Vine, and Other Stories, Sketches, and Essays* (New York: Bantam, 1977), 109. Buckley letter dated February 7, 1974; Moynihan letter dated July 14, 1972; Kennedy letter dated May 17, 1962; Johnson telegram dated February 2, 1967. All letters and telegram in Lionel Trilling Papers, Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library, box 10267.



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Richard Pells.² Surely the intellectual gave up more than he gained when sidling up to authority; acquiescing before a new cold war order, the once-oppositional thinker had not become a power so much as a slave. What follows confirms these largely critical assessments of Trilling's politics but reframes them in light of the concerns important to his only novel, *The Middle of the Journey* (1947). A once-radical intellectual, the novel's protagonist embraces the "emotional superstructure" of liberalism and views "states of being" as central to what this collection of essays calls "states of welfare."³ The particular states of being that matter to *The Middle of the Journey* have a decidedly existential cast and coalesce around what Trilling called "quietism" (187). Characters do not discuss policies and programs; they do not ask much of "power." Instead, they relish their experience of what it means "just—to—BE" (52). Having just read *The Middle of the Journey*, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. wrote the author an endorsement: "The political novel is a practically non-existent form in this country, once you get beyond the boss and the machine; and yours is a courageous attempt to get at very basic issues."⁴ In Trilling's novel, these issues are political precisely because they are basic—so basic that they involve the felt experience of life and death.

"There are practical and political advantages in right *feeling*," Trilling reasons in his 1939 study of Matthew Arnold.⁵ Following Arnold, Trilling prodded the American middle classes to heal the class divisions of the thirties by replacing ideological contest with existential feelings available to all.⁶ He did so on behalf of the New Deal state. In *Matthew Arnold*, Trilling writes for American readers for whom "the idea of the central state is still in dramatic dispute" (MA, 164). Taking sides, he declares that "the day has passed when it is progressive and revolutionary to cry for freedom from the State" (MA, 170). Americans were struggling to understand what Arnold understood, that "there is nothing essentially antagonistic between democracy and State, that, indeed, each demands the other for completeness, that democracy does not imply laissez-faire, that organization does not imply repression" (MA, 59). Trilling later suggested specific principles that might subtend that organization. In *The Liberal Imagination* (1950), he praises "a ready if mild suspiciousness of the profit motive, a belief in progress, science, social legislation, planning, and international cooperation."⁷ All the same, his interests did not lie in actual governmental programs. *Matthew Arnold* argues that the "State is no mere constable but a creative agency" and "an essentially mystical conception" (MA, 51, 225). This left it particularly open to literary manipulation: as we will see below, Trilling imagined himself buttressing the welfare state, not by advocating directly on behalf of its

² See in particular Christopher Lasch's *The New Radicalism in America: The Intellectual as a Social Type* (New York: Knopf, 1965) and Richard Pells's *Radical Visions and American Dreams* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).

³ Lionel Trilling, *The Middle of the Journey* (New York: NYRB Classics, 2002), 253; hereafter page numbers are given in the text.

⁴ Schlesinger to Trilling, August 26, 1947, Lionel Trilling Papers, Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library, box 10267.

⁵ Trilling, *Mathew Arnold* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1939), 212; hereafter cited in text as MA.

⁶ Trilling is not an existentialist in the vein of Jean-Paul Sartre. His work is not geared to decisive action and essence-defining choice. Rather, he embraces existentialism as it would be defined by onetime *Partisan Review* editor William Barrett, whose best-selling *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy* (1958) identifies existentialism as the terminus of Protestantism. For Barrett, "Existentialism of the Sartrian school" represents a "tiny" and misleading "fragment" of the whole. Rather, he suggests that Protestantism begins what existentialism formalizes: "that long modern struggle . . . to strip man naked." Barrett, *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1962), 17, 27. For an account of the influence of Continental existentialism on the postwar United States, see George Cotkin, *Existential America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

⁷ Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society*, ed. Louis Menand (New York: New York Review of Books, 2008), 98; hereafter cited in text as LI.

programs, but by explaining how the novel inculcated the passive “states of being” that he took to be central to the welfare state’s vision of social citizenship.

Trilling was never so much an agent of the welfare state as when he seemed to be decrying it. He advocated states of being that were anathema to what he took to be the defining feature of the interventionist state: bureaucracy.⁸ Though the New Deal had avoided the coercive extremes of its European counterparts on the Left and Right, its legacy remained at risk, Trilling thought, due to its rationalizing tendencies. He took those tendencies to be excessively therapeutic in their attempt to eradicate life’s mysterious complexities. Emblematic in this regard were “the charts and tables” of “statistical study” (*MO*, 122) in the Kinsey Report. Placing sex in the Petri dish, Kinsey robbed it of its “dark power” (*MO*, 125). Along these same lines, Trilling would condemn Karen Horney’s revisionist psychoanalysis as “a progressive psyche, a kind of New Deal agency which truly intends to do good but cannot always cope with certain reactionary forces”—those that Freud called “the savage difficulties of life.”⁹ Trilling’s invocation of “dark power” and “savage difficulties” echoes Max Weber, who had opposed a saving magical remnant to the dull and soul-parceling formalism of modern institutions. Following Weber, Trilling calls this remnant “*charisma*,” which he defines as “the hot, direct relationship with Godhead, or with the sources of life, upon which depend our notions of what I have called spiritual prestige” (*MO*, 189).

Preoccupied by what government becomes in the absence of appropriate forms of charisma, Trilling seems to anticipate Michel Foucault, for whom the welfare state epitomizes a technocratic governance designed to contain unruly populations. Nothing was more representative of the New Deal than charts and tables of statistics, and in deriding this scientism, Trilling derides the “biopower” that Michel Foucault has traced to the eighteenth-century “explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations.”¹⁰ But where Foucault seeks to expose state coercion, Trilling teaches the value of submission generally on behalf of the state. Trilling romanticizes the subjugated body. He gives dark power many names—“charisma,” the “unconscious,” or “biological intelligence” (*MO*, 222)—but consistently argues that it usefully chastens individual fantasies of agency. Advocating “a condition” in which “the will is freed from ‘particular aims,’” he urges his readers away

⁸ Weber figured centrally in postwar intellectual life. He helped Dwight Macdonald, for example, explain the nature of “bureaucratic collectivism” and the “modern tendency” toward “an inegalitarian and organic society in which the citizen is a means, not an end, and whose rulers are anti-traditional and scientifically minded.” Macdonald, *The Root Is Man* (Brooklyn, NY: Automeida, 1995), 37. Such accounts dominated the period’s leftism, though they did receive skeptical scrutiny. Suspicious of Macdonald-style radicalism, Meyer Shapiro accused Weber of couching his political analysis in disingenuous terms. As Shapiro put it in a 1945 essay—which Trilling copied in part into one of his notebooks—Weber asked what one could do to “preserve a remnant of our humanity from this parceling of the soul, this complete domination of bureaucratic life-ideals.” But according to Meyer, Weber “did not have in mind such commonplace things as oppression, poverty, unemployment and wars, but the spiritual malaise of the successful cultured bourgeois, who feels the incompatibility of modern professional routine and the inherited norms of a creative personal life.” Shapiro, “A Note on Weber’s Politics,” *Politics* 2, no. 2 (1945): 47. Weber’s importance to the New York intellectuals is one of the central topics of Howard Brick’s *Daniel Bell and the Decline of Intellectual Radicalism: Social Theory and Political Reconciliation in the 1940s* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986).

⁹ Lionel Trilling, *Speaking of Literature and Society*, ed. Diana Trilling (New York: Harcourt, 1980), 185.

¹⁰ For Foucault’s influence on writing about the welfare state, see Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller, eds., *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). For Foucault on “biopower,” see his *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage, 1990), 140. For an account of the “New Class,” see Alvin Gouldner, *The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class: A Frame of Reference, Thesis, Conjectures, Arguments, and an Historical Perspective on the Role of Intellectuals and Intelligentsia in the International Class Contest of the Modern Era* (New York: Seabury, 1979).

from a “predilection for the powerful, the fierce, the assertive, [and] the personally militant” (*MO*, 189).

In fact, despite the vitriol that he directs toward Kinsey, Trilling sometimes embraces probabilistic modes of thought precisely because they too chasten fantasies of power. The protagonist of *The Middle of the Journey* understands the recalcitrance of his body in a probabilistic manner: appreciating what it means “just—to—BE” means appreciating that your body functions according to “tendencies,” as Trilling will put it, beyond your control. Bearing witness to these tendencies, and “the elemental *given* of biology” (*MO*, 200) they express, individuals acknowledge the limits of their agency and thus learn to resist the instrumental reason of an otherwise bureaucratic liberalism. At the same time, individuals learn to understand themselves as needing care and therefore as the happy recipients of state largesse. The fact that all biological tendencies converge inexorably on one point dovetails with Trilling’s investment in what he calls “that peculiar charisma which has always been inherent in death” (*MO*, 222).¹¹ With one eye fixed on death, his novel insists, persons resist their own most dangerous drives and instead seek recompense for the loss and suffering that they could not alter or control.

“THE STORY OF HIS ILLNESS”

The Middle of the Journey describes a summer in the late 1930s during which John Laskell recovers from a near-fatal bout of scarlet fever. He does so while vacationing with his friends Arthur and Nancy Croom in rural Connecticut; all three have been committed for some time to progressive causes, and the central drama of the novel involves their different responses to the revelation that their mutual friend Gifford Maxim has broken with the Communist Party. Based on Whittaker Chambers, whose own apostasy would soon dominate the headlines, Maxim had encouraged Laskell and the Crooms in their activism. Neither Laskell nor the Crooms are party members; they are liberals. But they have considered themselves “decent people . . . people of good will” (127) because they have organized their liberalism around their sympathy for the Soviet Union. What to believe now? Maxim’s defection leaves Laskell and the Crooms unsure of their liberalism. More broadly, it represents a defining crisis in the class to which Trilling himself belonged: “the educated, progressive middle classes, especially in its upper reaches” (xxxii).

The New Deal frames this crisis. Trilling sets *The Middle of the Journey* amid tracts of forest cleared by the Civilian Conservation Corps and given local color by artists on relief and farmers who “talk against the [business] interests” (83) while appointing their homes with “low-cost ingenuities” suggested “by the Department of Agriculture” (84). Ensnared in these rationally cultivated environs, Trilling’s intellectuals “talk of welfare” and debate the nature of “*caritas*” (256, 318). But these are largely hypothetical conversations: Trilling’s male professionals appreciate the idea of welfare more than they need it. Not clients of the state, they already enjoy what Laskell calls “our safe life” (128). Arthur Croom is an economics professor at a private college. The

¹¹ This definition is accurate enough: postwar sociologists often described charisma in existential terms that resonate with Trilling’s. As Edward Shils put it, “the charismatic quality of an individual as perceived by others, or himself, lies in what is thought to be his connection with (including possession by or embodiment of) some very central feature of man’s existence.” Most commonly, Weber saw this connection as necessarily rare; he defined “charisma” as “a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities.” But Trilling locates the attributes of charisma in less idiosyncratic and individuated terms and more in relation to forms of existence experienced by all. Shills, “Charisma, Order and Status,” *American Sociological Review* 30 (1965): 201; Weber, *Max Weber: On Charisma and Institution Building; Selected Papers*, ed. S. N. Eisenstadt (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 48.

biggest danger to his job, quips Laskell, is that he might be made dean. Laskell benefits from a moderate financial legacy, which has freed him to become “an expert in public housing” (37).

Freed from financial worries, Laskell possesses an encompassing vision. He loves his work because it “deals with the basic needs of poor people” (37). More than this, he loves the fact that “nothing was irrelevant to his profession,” and that “every aspect of culture bore upon it, economics, sociology, history, technics, art” (40). No myopic academic, Laskell echoes Trilling, a mainstay of *Partisan Review*, which according to Irving Howe “celebrated the idea of the intellectual as anti-specialist . . . the writer as a roamer among theories, as dilettante connoisseur, as *luftmensch* of the mind.”¹² This ideal is at odds with what we discover was Maxim’s work for the party—and his insistence that “as a revolutionary I was wholly professional” (150). Maxim specialized in death, on occasion assassinating enemies of the party. The discovery of this fact precipitates still more anxiety among many of the novel’s liberals. At the same time, it enables Laskell to consolidate his liberalism, which he will henceforth understand in relation to “the very basic issues” of life and death.

Laskell learns of Maxim’s break before the Crooms do, after his illness and the evening before he heads to the country. Maxim approaches him for help securing a job at a liberal publication, *The New Era*, with whose editor Laskell has influence. Confused as to why Maxim wants the job, Laskell asks, “what are you up to?” Maxim answers, “A man must live. I’m trying to live” (143). Laskell suspects that when Maxim says, “A man must live,” he “did not mean make a living. He meant not dying.” Maxim confirms that he wants to appear on the masthead of the journal so that it will be harder to kill him. “A man who does not exist can be got rid of easily”; “I mean,” he clarifies, “killed” (145). Maxim knows of what he speaks. But Laskell senses something else in his friend’s plaintive assertion, “I have to exist” (143). He understands this claim in terms of how Maxim has long understood politics. Maxim “never formulated” his position so much as he “made it by being what he was” (134).¹³ Alone among his liberal peers, Laskell will learn from Maxim’s politics of “being.”

Bodies and their capacity to experience pain were once all that mattered to Maxim, who worked for the party as a “technician in human suffering” (133). Laskell will become a technician in human suffering as well. The difference is that he will learn how to experience suffering rather than induce it in others: Laskell is liberal, as opposed to totalitarian, because he learns to embrace as a condition of his own being what Maxim the technician would impose on others from above. Laskell has recently experienced the untimely death of his fiancée and a near-fatal sickness. It seems to Laskell somehow right that his infirmity in particular should give way to the drama of Maxim’s defection: “by some logic that Laskell did not wholly understand, the story of Maxim’s visit came as the natural sequence to the story of his illness” (17). But that logic is simple enough: Laskell has had “scarlet fever.” This fever burns out a political infection: the “red

¹² Irving Howe, *A Margin of Hope* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1982), 161. Trilling belonged to an era, Bruce Robbins reminds us, when university critics honed their professional bona fides by asserting “that academics is *not* a profession—if by profession we mean doctors and lawyers.” Instead, academics imagined themselves “closer to social workers than to doctors.” Robbins quoted in Daniel T. O’Hara, *Lionel Trilling: The Work of Liberation* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 51.

¹³ One way to understand Maxim’s desire to “make a living” working for *The New Era* is to understand it as a desire to become a different kind of professional: he wants to make a living not by performing specialized political work for the party but by writing generalist literary criticism for a liberal journal. This issue went to the heart of *Partisan Review*, the journal for which Trilling often wrote. Affiliated with the Communist Party when it was founded in 1934, the journal closed down in 1936 and reopened two years later with no ties to the party. Rather than understand itself as part of a revolutionary vanguard of professional political agents, it embraced the autonomy of the cultural generalist.

menace” of Communism. Laskell rediscovers his liberalism in and through his illness. Pointedly, while ill he receives ministrations from one “Nurse Paine.” In her care, he will learn not simply the virtues of pain but the new Rights of Man that these virtues enable.

Paine’s care stands in for the bureaucratizing of intimacy accomplished by modern health care: without relatives, Laskell opens his home to a professional who communicates feelings of tenderness that she does not actually possess. “So long as her function lasted,” he recalls, “she had thrown her protection around him, and to him it had appeared in the form of love” (157). After he recovers, Laskell discovers that he has been blanketed less by Paine’s love for him than by her love for her function. Still, Paine facilitates a new kind of experience—one that mitigates the incipiently bureaucratic nature of her ministrations. Tended by her on death’s door, passive before an illness he can only observe, Laskell becomes “inexplicably interested in questions of being, in questions of his own existence” (170). Appropriately enough, he is most interested in the experience of pain. He contemplates “the human body and the human mind as being able to suffer” (256). Doing so offers a new liberal polity, a “sense of community with men in their suffering and goodness” (258).

As it turns out, that community need not involve illness or physical pain. Trilling’s liberalism is grounded in a vision of exquisite existential helplessness. Laskell thinks after his bout with scarlet fever, “nothing that he had now and nothing that he was likely ever to have could have anything like the value of the peace, the strength and integrity he had known in his ill-health” (29). He is wrong; he experiences these attributes again, on the banks of a stream with a local woman named Emily Caldwell. She is Pleasure to Laskell’s Paine. In an erotic interlude as reportedly natural as it is altering, she teaches him to renounce his will and inhabit his body. Lying in repose afterward, Laskell relishes his passivity: “His mind, submerged deeper and deeper beneath the dark and unoppressive somnolence of his body, held a last awareness of its willing extinction.” Whether in the grips of pleasure or pain, Laskell embraces the charisma of death: all at once, he understands why “men had used the word ‘die’ for the last destroying agony of love, which they sought” (235). Emily “submissive” (231), Laskell recalling that “he had been in love with death” (233), they submit themselves to forces larger than themselves.

This disposition turns out to be incipiently political. While ill, Laskell enjoys “quite a love affair with death” (31). This teaches him a lesson that Trilling learned from E. M. Forster: “Death destroys a man, but the idea of death saves him.”¹⁴ After regaining his strength, Laskell

¹⁴ Mark Krupnick calls this sentence Trilling’s “preeminent touchstone for thinking about the moral life.” Krupnick, *Lionel Trilling and the Fate of Cultural Criticism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1986), 91. Trilling also found that lesson in Freud: “the aim of all life is death” (*MO*, 449), he argues in “The Fate of Pleasure.” Freud was important to Trilling’s welfare state liberalism. As Eli Zaretsky has it, Trilling “defended the need for institutions, professions, and political authority, while invoking the instinctual and sexual bases of identity as correctives to bureaucratization and conformity.” Zaretsky, *Secrets of the Soul: A Social and Cultural History of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Vintage, 2004), 301. But it is worth adding that Trilling shunned “heroic” understandings of the instinctual drives. “The Fate of Pleasure” locates the death drive at the heart of all pleasure but uses Wordsworth to exemplify how pleasure is an “elementary principle,” most powerful when “native and naked” (*MO*, 429; emphasis in original). Wordsworth embraced the “simple and primitive meaning” of pleasure and suggested the “state of virtually infantile passivity” (*MO*, 438, 443) at the heart of what might otherwise seem aggressive instinctual drives. Similarly, Trilling argued elsewhere that Freud’s “sense of himself as a biological fact” led him to view biology as a “given.” This led to the moderating recognition that we cannot simply “do what we wish with ourselves, with mankind.” Trilling, *Freud and the Crisis of Our Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 47–48. We might therefore say that Trilling elaborates Freud’s “negative Oedipal complex”—his account of boys who seek their father’s love through submission as opposed to aggression or rivalry. It is with this particular account of the Oedipus complex, Zaretsky reasons in another context,

leaves the city to stay with the Crooms in the country, “to lay his near death experience at the feet of life” (16). But while he and the Crooms are “drawn together into a family by the thought of the danger that Laskell had escaped” (18), the Crooms resent him for his romance with death. “More than most,” the Crooms “were committed to life” (16)—and to a denial of anything dark within it. The idea of death does not save them in any sense, and their suspicion of Laskell reflects this fact. As Trilling writes in the introduction, “If Laskell’s preoccupation were looked at closely and objectively, they seem to be saying, might it not be understood as actually an affirmation of death, which is, in practical outcome, a negation of the future and of the hope it holds out for a society of reason and virtue.” In sum, the Crooms think Laskell’s love affair with death is “reactionary” (xxi).

Trilling feared the reactionary less than he did the Left’s pursuit of “reason and virtue,” which he thought a “negation” of the messiness and compromise at the heart of “what is properly to be called a political life” (xxx–xxxi). In fact, he fears the Crooms and their sanctimony—which he codes as Protestant. Trilling’s novel follows Max Weber in linking the Protestant pursuit of “reason and virtue” to bureaucracy and thus to all that is most depersonalizing in modern life. As Weber had it, the Calvinist’s uncompromising and ascetic commitment to reason and virtue led to a “rationalized . . . life-system,” a “rational formation of the entire being” that was “now in the world yet still oriented toward the supernatural”—“in the world” but “not of this world or for this world.” By the twentieth century, the orientation toward the supernatural remained only in the zeal with which individuals pursued their necessarily compartmentalized, technocratic tasks. “The limitation of persons to specialized work,” he reasons, “which necessitates their renunciation of the Faustian multidimensionality of the human species, is in our world today the precondition for doing anything of value at all.” In essence, radical Protestantism begins a process of rationalization that outlasts its initial purpose; religious activity once animated by values and ideas becomes, as Weber famously had it, “routinized.”¹⁵ Trilling reverses this process, to make an identical point. Maxim abandons his specialized work for the party—a bureaucracy if there ever was one, Trilling felt—and converts to radical Protestantism. He exchanges communist for Christian zealotry with ease.¹⁶ Amazed at his moral severity, one character cries out, “What is

that “Freud can be described as outing the white male professional’s passive and dependent wishes.” Zaretsky, *Secrets of the Soul*, 61.

¹⁵ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 3rd ed., trans. Stephen Kalberg (Los Angeles: Roxbury, 2002), 69, 101, 123. Weber continues: “The Puritan wanted to be a person with a vocational calling; today we are forced to be. For to the extent that asceticism moved out of the monastic cell, was transferred to the life of work in a vocational calling, and then commenced to rule over this-worldly morality, it helped to construct the powerful cosmos of the modern economic order. Tied to the technical and economic conditions at the foundation of mechanical and machine production, this cosmos today determines the style of life of all individuals born into it” (123; emphasis in original). Thus, he felt that the “‘obligation to search for and then accept a vocational calling’ now wanders around in our lives as the ghost of beliefs no longer anchored in the substance of religion” (124). This ghost was real and trapped moderns within “a steel-hard casing” (122).

¹⁶ We should read *The Middle of the Journey* as the first in a series of postwar texts preoccupied with the relation between Communism and Calvinism. Daniel Bell’s *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1960) traces the concept of ideology to the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century. A student of Irving Howe’s, Michael Walzer produced in *The Revolution of the Saints* (1965) the definitive account of how Calvinism gave rise to contemporary notions of radical politics. Zealous and programmatic, boasting a “military and political work-ethic,” Walzer’s Calvinism made “replacing the lost Eden . . . a matter of concrete political activity.” Its adherents knew no boundary between their private and public selves. “The pious and rigorous routine of their lives brought them a sense of self-assurance, which was the end of alienation and which in politics often looked very much like fanaticism.” Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 13, 28, 30.

this, Calvinism?" (349). Indeed it is, and as Trilling has it, the Crooms display a similar Calvinism, which is why Laskell concludes the novel by insisting that Maxim and the Crooms together define the dangers facing liberalism.

The problem, as Trilling sees it in *The Liberal Imagination*, is that liberal culture does not supply emotions other than those that validate reason and virtue. Liberals therefore find darker emotions, instead, in "Yeats and Eliot, Proust and Joyce, Lawrence and Gide," writers who, as he has it, "do not seem to confirm us in the social and political ideals which we hold" (*LI*, 301). Thus, *The Liberal Imagination* describes how middle-class readers replenish the emotional reserves of liberalism from the stockpiles of politically suspect modernists. The Crooms are right in one respect: liberalism does require the reactionary. "There is no connection," Trilling announces, "between our educated class and the deep places of the imagination" (*LI*, 99). This class visited these places with largely reactionary literary guides (which is no doubt why Trilling would later send Jackie Kennedy a collection of Lawrence's stories).¹⁷

But the Crooms do not have the last word, for *The Middle of the Journey* represents Trilling's effort to supply liberalism with a dark power less reactionary than the kind found in the works of high modernists. His novel draws not from fascism but from an existential disposition that he locates at the heart of English Romanticism. In his essay "Wordsworth and the Rabbis" (1950), Trilling describes a "sentiment of being" that enables Wordsworth's characters to "endure because of what they are." These characters "survive out of a kind of biological faith"; they are possessed of "quietism" and a "calm submission to the law of things" (*MO*, 187).¹⁸ Strikingly, Trilling declares the sentiment of being "a political fact . . . the basis, and the criterion, of democracy" (*MO*, 192). "Wordsworth's disciple" Keats seems to Trilling the Romantic most apropos to twentieth-century American democracy, organized as it is around the welfare state.¹⁹ For Keats, existential quietude speaks to the individual's perception of pain and radical contingency, and to the equivocal solace he finds in entering into communities designed to mitigate this contingency. The preface to *The Liberal Imagination* insists on the central importance of Keats's negative capability to liberalism. "So far as liberalism is active and positive, so far, that is, as it moves toward organization, it tends to select the emotions and qualities that are most susceptible of organization." Consequently, liberalism "drifts toward the denial of emotions and the imagination" (*MO*, 546, 547). Against this sanitizing impetus, Keats "means to acknowledge with the mind the pain of the world" (*MO*, 245). As Trilling understands it, "*Negative Capability*" embraces "being in uncertainties" (*MO*, 246; emphasis in original); it "brings two knowledges face to face, the knowledge of the world of circumstance, of death and cancer, and the knowledge of the world of self, of spirit and creation, and the delight in them" (*MO*, 253). Striking an

¹⁷ "Death is significant," wrote Walter Lowrie, "with reference to this present life of which it is the end. It is not, as we like to think, merely an event which some day we shall encounter; but because it is an event we can certainly count on, it defines what we *are* in every moment." For a while, this view accorded with Lowrie's embrace of Roosevelt's New Deal. But Lowrie moved quickly to ardent support for Benito Mussolini. Lowrie quoted in Cotkin, *Existential America*, 40.

¹⁸ This disposition strikes Trilling as rabbinical in nature—a fact that speaks to his relation to Matthew Arnold. For Arnold, a harmonizing "Hellenism" was necessary to counter what he took to be the crass "Hebraism" of utilitarian society. Trilling's essay on Wordsworth tacitly refutes this opposition. In naming the "sentiment of being" Hebraic, he claims for the Jews the harmonizing properties that Arnold took from them—this not in spite of but because of their essentially submissive relation to worldly power. For an account of Arnold's relation to racial typing, see Vincent Pecora, *Secularization and Cultural Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 146.

¹⁹ For an account of the liberal aesthetics of submission as it relates to Keats and British Romanticism, see Andrea Henderson, *Romanticism and the Painful Pleasures of Modern Life* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2008).

exquisite balance, Keats's negative capability hovers "between the sense of personal identity and the certainty of pain and extinction" (*MO*, 250).

Laskell hovers precisely here during his illness, while "lying in a delicate balance between danger and safety" (47). Thus perched, he finds "his friendship with himself" (214). Laskell's self-friendship sheds important light on what might seem an otherwise unremarkable account of his politics: "so far as politics went, his friends knew that Laskell was quite as 'conscious' as they were" (37). Understood in the language of the group to which he and the Crooms belong, Laskell is as "conscious" as the next, for example, "of the injustices of the world . . . of oppression—of the Negroes and Jews at home, of the colonial peoples, of the imprisoned and tortured libertarians abroad" (86). But he understands his politics less as the expression of issues about which he is conscious than as the physical experience of consciousness itself.²⁰

Intellectuals of the thirties and forties, Trilling writes in the novel's introduction, were consumed by "an impassioned longing to believe" (xxviii). But in what can they believe when they turn from the Soviet Union? When asked what follows from Maxim's account of what he did for the Communist Party, one of the novel's liberals declares, "I'd go so far as to say that it would make political thought as we know it impossible" (269). The extremity of the statement suggests that Maxim's truck with death does not invalidate belief in party ideology so much as belief in any system of political thought. As Laskell will point out, "belief is difficult and complicated" (270). In fact, he suggests that it is so complicated that it often has no object beyond the material body, with its inexorable movement toward death. It is thus appropriate that, lying in his sickbed, Laskell does not have beliefs so much as discover the origin of belief in physical processes. He "lay through the day, drinking in the light that filled the room, and experienced something just short of an emotion. It had great delicacy and simplicity, as if the circulation of his blood had approached the threshold of his consciousness and was just about to become an idea. It was as if being had become a sensation" (52).

This moment exemplifies an injunction central to *The Liberal Imagination*: that we attend to how ideas and emotions fluidly change into each other. Bureaucracy makes this difficult. The collection begins by announcing that "organization means delegation, and agencies, and bureaus, and technicians, and that the ideas that can survive delegation, that can be passed on to agencies and bureaus and technicians, incline to be ideas of a certain kind and of a certain simplicity: they give up something of their largeness and modulation and complexity in order to survive" (*MO*, 547). For Trilling, simple ideas do not derive from the body; they are lifeless abstractions. Complex ideas, on the other hand, emerge from nuanced negotiations with the body. "Our continued influxes of feeling," he writes, quoting Wordsworth, "are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representations of all our past feelings." The interflow between an emotion and an idea is a psychological fact which we would do well to keep clearly in mind, together with the part that is played by desire, will, and imagination in philosophy as well as in literature" (*LI*, 287). Laskell's cognizance of the flow of his blood literalizes the injunction to "keep clearly in mind" the "interflow" between emotions and ideas. Absorbed in

²⁰ This is akin to the claim made in Trilling's short story "The Other Margaret"—"Life aware of itself seemed so much more life" (29)—and the kind of Hegelian experience to which so much of *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1971) devotes itself: "the mind in its defining act," becoming "aware of itself," threatened by self-difference but coming to understand that "alienation of self is really self-preservation." Trilling, "The Other Margaret," *Partisan Review* 12 (1963): 494; Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 34, 38.

his sentiment of being, he does not lay claim to or otherwise exert agency over an idea so much as he experiences himself having one.

The Middle of the Journey explores how Wordsworth and Keats might displace reactionary modernists in the emotional life of liberalism. Based as it is on a languorous passivity, Laskell's consciousness of his circulating blood offers one instance of the Romanticism that Trilling valorizes. But that consciousness also clarifies the liberalism in question, especially insofar as it exemplifies the claim, in *The Liberal Imagination*, that "beliefs" are "not so much formulations of theory or principles of action as they are emotional tendencies" (MO, 4). Trilling's frequent use of the words "tendency" and "tendencies" (they appear twenty-six times in *The Liberal Imagination* alone) signals his commitment to the probabilistic thinking that was central to the New Deal welfare state. In *Matthew Arnold*, Trilling claims that Arnold saw liberalism as something restlessly in motion, possessing "*tendencies*" (MA, 165; emphasis in original). With its origins in German idealism, early anthropology, and the nineteenth-century revolutionary tradition, the word "tendencies" suggests to Trilling, as it did to predecessors like Herder and Boas, likely trajectories of development in a living organism—determined by a synergy of environment, predetermined conditions, and, perhaps most importantly, chance.

Trilling was one of many to link the probabilistic, biological sense of "tendencies" to political and aesthetic phenomena. Versions of the word move prominently through central texts of modernism: in the inaugural issue of *Criterion*, where T. S. Eliot explains the difference between political "programs" and more flexible "tendencies"; in the 1939 essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," where Clement Greenberg names kitsch the "official tendency" of the totalitarian state; in "The Dark Rider and the Necessary Angel," where Wallace Stevens writes that "the tendency toward the connotative is the tendency today."²¹ In all these examples we are proximate to what I have called "New Deal Modernism"—an actuarial logic that animated a range of New Deal strategies for representing political community. But with the exception of Stevens, few of these figures elaborated this logic as comprehensively as Trilling.

The actuarial logic of the welfare state depends upon the collection of statistics. These statistics are the state's substrate, the traces of its virtual form. As Louis Menand tells us, "the term 'statistics' is etymologically linked to 'state': statisticians were sometimes called 'statists,' and before the adoption of the German term *Statistik*, their work was referred to, in English, as 'political arithmetic.'"²² The compensatory mechanisms of the welfare state take shape in and through the political arithmetic of the actuarial table, which situates the individual alongside others in the context of statistical probabilities—or "risks"—over which he or she has no control. As I argue elsewhere, to read an actuarial table is to understand the basis for a new kind of social citizenship, in which individuals come together not in fantasies of collective agency but in a shared awareness of their susceptibility to contingency and consequent need for institutional assistance.²³

²¹ T. S. Eliot, *Criterion* (1922); Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Perceptions and Judgments, 1939–1944*, ed. John O'Brien (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 20; Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1981), 14.

²² Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001), 187.

²³ See Michael Szalay, *New Deal Modernism: American Literature and the Invention of the Welfare State* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000). Particularly relevant to Laskell's self-experience is my claim that the welfare state encouraged self-differentiation and split consciousness. New Deal artists, I argue, produced visions of community in which individuals are represented imagining two pictures of the world, one in which they are passive as isolated

The fact that tendencies are studied empirically, as opposed to theoretically, will suggest to Trilling the properly liberal nature of the welfare state enterprise. Actuarial tendencies generate a liberal political arithmetic to the extent that they are open-ended and invoke, only to fragment, a Marxist vision of totality and inevitability. Signaling a diversity of possible outcomes and “trends” (an etymological cousin), Trilling’s tendencies refute what Maxim, invoking Marxist theory, calls “the *inexorable* logic of the situation” (253; emphasis in original). Against this inexorability, Trilling’s tendencies modestly mark what might be anticipated; they do not predict unalterable realities so much as insist upon broad trajectories. Thus, he will claim in *The Liberal Imagination* that a specifically liberal dialectics requires nothing more or less than the recognition of “a developing series—the important word is ‘developing’” (LI, 283).

This said, death matters to Trilling’s existentialism because it represents the one certainty, the invariable terminus of all human development. It is beyond statistics and thus, however paradoxical this might seem, the ultimate form of security. Laskell can accept “his life of uncertainty” (294) so long as he keeps his mortality on his mind. He steers his course by death; he notes, “the truest, surest, most reliable things were dead, dead-shot, dead-right, dead-center, dead-certainty, dead-ahead” (324). Sinking downward toward darkness, our bodies are laden with an inexorable logic greater than any found in history. We inherit the only agency we will ever have by becoming absorbed in them and reading the trend correctly.

“BECOMING A PUBLIC FACT”

Dwight Macdonald’s “The Root Is Man” (1946), a search for a “new political vocabulary” rooted in European existentialism, is a defining statement of postwar radicalism. It questions the “Progressive notion of what is ‘real’ and what is ‘unreal’ in political action”—more specifically, it takes issue with the assumption “that consciousness (and conscience) are less ‘real’ than the material environment, and that the individual is less ‘real’ than society.” Macdonald disapproves of this assumption because it suggests “that the only ‘real’ political action is on a mass scale, one involving trade unions, parties [and] the movements of classes.”²⁴ Shunning this scale, he advocates a cultivation of the self: “We must emphasize the emotions, the imagination, the moral feelings, the primacy of the individual human being.”²⁵

Though he does not share Macdonald’s radicalism, Trilling similarly emphasizes personal experience as an alternative to what he took to be reductive or misleading accounts of what was “real” in political life. In this sense, his project required a purely semantic reinvention of “politics.” *The Liberal Imagination* declares its commitment to “the wide sense of the word [politics]” (LI, xvii).²⁶ In doing so, it suggests less that words are as “real” as institutions—that “a new po-

victims of circumstance and the other in which they are active as collectivized agents of their own salvation. Thus, artists generated national community through forms of self-doubling that rendered citizens simultaneously at risk and transcendental spectators removed from their own imagined abjection and ensconced safely in larger groups (206). My claim here is that *The Middle of the Journey* deploys this doubling on newly existential terrain, in the service of rendering self-experience and existential contemplation a cornerstone of middle-class political life.

²⁴ Macdonald, *The Root Is Man*, 130.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 151.

²⁶ The immediate context for his language seems to be Eliot’s essay “The Idea of a Christian Society,” first delivered as three lectures in England in 1939 and made available in print one year before Trilling issued his volume (i.e., in 1949). Perhaps responding to Trilling’s formulation the year before of beliefs as “emotional tendencies,” Eliot chastises liberalism as only a “tendency . . . which tends to release energy rather than accumulate it.” Eliot’s account of liberalism was by then familiar and in some respects similar to Trilling’s: “by destroying traditional social habits of the people, by dissolving their natural collective consciousness into individual constituents . . . Liberalism can prepare the

litical vocabulary,” as Macdonald puts it, is the same as “political action . . . on a mass scale . . . involving trade unions, parties [and] the movements of classes”—than that “what is properly to be called a political life” might be transformed by its linguistic definition. “Our fate,” Trilling reasons, “is political. It is . . . not a happy fate, even if it has an heroic sound, but there is no escape from it, and the only possibility of enduring is to force into our definition of politics every human activity and every subtlety of every human activity. There are manifest dangers in doing this, but greater dangers in not doing it. Unless we insist that politics is imagination and mind, we will learn that imagination and mind are politics, and of a kind that we will not like” (*LI*, 100). Much depends here on the counterintuitive insistence that in changing our sense of the word “politics” we change what falls under the purview of the political. Insistent that “politics” is “imagination and mind,” Trilling widens our sense of the word and thereby imagines (“imagination” now a political agency) rescuing “imagination and mind” from more ostensibly real forces.

We can further specify this broadly linguistic interest in the real and its relation to politics, in both class and generic terms. Trilling’s notebooks describe an aborted project on “the idea of power” and detail a new “theory of the middle class”: that it “is not to be determined by its financial situation but rather by its relation to government.” By the lights of this theory, “one could shade down from an actual ruling governing class to a class hopelessly out of relation to government, thinking of government as beyond its control, of itself as wholly controlled by government.” Having detailed these echelons, he notes, “Somewhere in between and in gradations is the group that . . . does not have the sense of a perfectly real or immediate connection with government: ideals, desires, emotions intervene.”²⁷ He likes the middle class because its commitment to “the primacy of the individual human being” is a commitment to something other than “a perfectly real” vision of government—because this class uses “ideals, desires, [and] emotions” to invent its own “idea of power.” These terms anticipate those later supplied by Alvin Gouldner, who described a “New Class” comprising “symbol specialists” who performed the managerial functions of the postwar welfare state. As Gouldner saw it, members of this class were more than typically inclined “to disrupt established social solidarities and cultural values” and to believe “that ‘What Is’ may be mistaken or inadequate and . . . therefore open to alternatives.”²⁸ Trilling also believed in the world-shaping power of symbols. But his middle class disrupts few social solidarities or cultural values; quite the contrary, it promulgates those values on behalf of the ruling class above it.

As Trilling saw it, the middle class traditionally received its ideals, desires, and emotions from literature—from the novel in particular. In *The Liberal Imagination*, he argues that “the novel of the last two hundred years” taught its middle-class reader “that reality is not as his conventional education has led him to see it” (*LI*, 222). But he also suggests that, more recently, the novel had lost its way, with dire consequences for the middle class. It had embraced a vision of reality in line with conventional education. Particularly alarming to Trilling are Theodore Dre-

way for that which is its own negation: the artificial, mechanized or brutalised [*sic*] control which is a desperate remedy for its chaos.” But it is the remark that follows that most anticipates Trilling’s preface. “It must be evident,” Eliot says, “that I am speaking of Liberalism in a sense much wider than any which can be fully exemplified by the history of any political party, and equally in a wider sense than any in which it has been used in ecclesiastical controversy.” T. S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture: The Idea of a Christian Society and Notes toward the Definition of Culture* (New York: Harcourt, 1976), 12.

²⁷ Lionel Trilling Papers, Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library, box 10267.

²⁸ Gouldner quoted in Charles Derber, William A. Schwartz, and Yale R. Magrass, *Power in the Highest Degree: Professionals and the Rise of a New Mandarin Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 178.

iser, John Dos Passos, and proletarian writers of the thirties, all of whom accord material and economic conditions a determining force in social life. Invoking the “real” in its “external and hard, gross, [and] unpleasant” aspects, these writers suggest that “power” is “crude, ugly and un-discriminating.” Trilling instead advocates a “precise and discriminating” (*LI*, 215) vision of power, which he thinks the novel capable of providing for its readers, because that vision has the capacity to qualify reductive accounts of reality. But the precise and discriminating power of which Trilling speaks does more than simply qualify mistaken accounts of reality. Emphasizing “the emotions, the imagination, the moral feelings, [and] the primacy of the individual human being,” novelists change the reality they set out to engage—provided they conceive of that reality as something other than external and hard. Trilling invests as much as he does in the novel because he believes that “in the novel manners make men. It does not matter in what sense the word manners is taken” (*LI*, 216). As we will see, this pointedly broad gesture—“it does not matter in what sense the word manners is taken”—indicates an elision between manners as a determining power within the novel and the novel as a determining power within a larger social and political field. To Trilling, manners make men within the novel as the novel makes men beyond its own confines.

I have already indicated Trilling’s commitment to the actuarial logic of “tendencies” and the view of social citizenship implicit in the welfare state, in which individuals understand themselves as belonging to a national community based on their shared need of institutional protection from risk. Time and again, Trilling admonished his readers to understand the limits of their agency and reconcile themselves to all they cannot control. Is it correct, then, to say that he counseled cognizance of the determined nature of life? Not precisely: on the face of it, tendencies aggregate the past in the service of predicting the future; they measure probabilities, not certainties. As Laskell understands them, “tendencies” do not dictate reality. He knows the difference between the inexorable and a developing series. He scorns those who invoke “family ‘tendencies,’ illnesses of mind or body that are yet to appear” but “must inevitably recur in their own lives” (238). This much Emily Caldwell understands when she explains of her daughter Susan’s weak heart, “of course it’s just a *condition*. Nothing *has* to happen” (240; emphasis in original): in x number of children with her particular form of heart disease, only y number end up developing symptoms.

But something does happen. The second half of Trilling’s novel revolves around the death of Susan Caldwell. During a public recital, Susan stumbles in her recitation of a poem by William Blake. Unaware of her “*condition*,” Duck drunkenly delivers his daughter two blows that turn out to be fatal. Following this event, Trilling’s characters embark upon involved conversations over the nature of responsibility and the “claims” that individuals rightly and wrongly make upon each other.²⁹ Who kills Susan? At one level, Duck does, and in this respect we might see Trilling

²⁹ Robert Warshow’s blistering assessment of the novel—that it thinks more than it feels—no doubt stems from these passages, when Laskell, Maxim, and the Crooms wax philosophical. In “The Legacy of the Thirties” (1947) Warshow decries that decade as “an age of organized mass disingenuousness” (4) during which “the Communist-liberal-New Deal movement” (5) encouraged “everyone [to become] a *professional* politician, acting within a framework of ‘realism’ that tended to make political activity an end in itself” (4; emphasis his). Warshow disapproves, though not because “everyone” wanted to be a politician. Rather, he wants a still more inclusive notion of politics. Postwar intellectuals like Trilling, he avers, “refused to assimilate” their experience as experience—they “dealt with it only politically,” which means that they were craven before the ideological dimensions of political life. Intellectuals mistakenly took to asking themselves, “What is my opinion of all of this?” Warshow wants instead a “usable vocabulary” less “of opinion” than “of feeling,” one able to restore “the emotional and moral content of experience” (6). He thinks “the modern world is suffering from a paralysis of feeling” (11) and reads *The Middle of the Journey* as

reluctantly acknowledging the importance of those “gross” and “unpleasant” social facts with which he thinks contemporary realism excessively preoccupied. The Crooms think the working-class Duck exceptionally “real” (23), and while Laskell does not, it is hard to miss how Duck’s brutality recalibrates the novel’s otherwise luxuriating relation to death: it is one thing to relish an imagined experience of death—and to insist on the power of the imagination generally—and quite another to watch a small child die before you. In this, Duck is the persistence of the obdurately material, the real as hard and external. He is the banality of the working classes, come home to roost. To this extent, he is the kind of citizen conjured by what Trilling took to be the welfare state in its most oppressively banal form: tending toward simplicity, “agencies, and bureaus, and technicians” depend upon the clear-cut vision of reality that Duck seems to represent.

At the same time, it could be argued that Trilling acknowledges in Susan’s death the pernicious effects of his own contempt for the banal and his related efforts to use culture to control (implicitly, on behalf of the welfare state) and regulate those from the working class. For Laskell’s refinement, his commitment to proper manners, also contributes to Susan Caldwell’s death. Watching the child practice for her performance, he repeatedly corrects the “expressive” (311) style that Susan learns from her mother. This confuses her, leaves her unprepared for her public performance, and, he thinks, leads to her death. “So sensitive, so devoted to good taste” (310), he meddles where he should not. The comment is equivocal in the extreme, because even as Laskell condemns himself for her death, he claims for “good taste” a power equivalent to a series of blows delivered by a member of the working class. It is no coincidence that this good taste governs what he takes to be the correct interpretation of a visionary poet who proselytized on behalf of the determining powers of the imagination. Though in an unexpected fashion, Laskell’s critical interpretation of Blake triggers the world-shaping literary agency important to that poet.

Other postwar political novels offer similarly equivocal accounts of their ostensibly world-shaping power. They obsessively reiterate the power of manners by dramatizing unanticipated connections between traditional politics and Victorian social mores. In *All the King’s Men* (1946), Jack Burden reasons that his refusal to sleep with Ann Stanton as a teen leads years later to the assassination of a reformist governor. In *The Manchurian Candidate* (1959), Richard Condon suggests that Ben Marco, a “Little Gentleman,” unwittingly gives Raymond Shaw time to kill again—by being “hipped on the sanctity of the honeymoon in an entirely subjective manner.”³⁰ These novels share with Trilling’s a Jesuitical tracing of cause and effect that contributes, finally, to an extravagant sense of what novels can themselves accomplish. In all three, the precipitating behavior in question is priggish in the extreme, and the narrative demonstrates the po-

symptomatic of this paralysis, especially because it “reduces the whole problem of modern experience to a question of right and wrong opinion.” Trilling writes as someone forced “to translate experience into ideas” (17, 18). The result is “political discussion [that] becomes a form of entertainment and defense against experience: by providing a fixed system of moral and political attitudes, it protects us from the shock of experience and conceals our helplessness” (8). Warshaw, “The Legacy of the 30s,” in *The Immediate Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001). Leslie Fiedler agrees with Warshaw; his review of the novel complains that Laskell “dissolves into his ideas”; see Fiedler, “Review of *The Middle of the Journey*,” *Kenyon Review* 10, no. 3 (1948): 519–27. Mark Krupnick largely agrees with Warshaw; he sees Trilling “striving for . . . [a] fiction of ideas.” In support of this view, Krupnick reduces the Crooms to two-dimensional caricatures, “the Stalinist fellow traveler as social type” and also as “philistine.” Krupnick, *Lionel Trilling*, 91, 90. Diana Trilling also calls *The Middle of the Journey* “a novel of ideas” in *The Beginning of the Journey: The Marriage of Diana and Lionel Trilling* (New York: Harvest, 1993), 90. Alan Wald suggests that the pastoral setting of the novel undermines Trilling’s own commitment to experience. Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), chap. 8.

³⁰ Richard Condon, *The Manchurian Candidate* (New York: Jove, 1988), 266.

tentially lethal consequences of clinging to outmoded middle-class manners. At the same time, novelists tell such stories, not simply to highlight the continuing power of manners, but to demonstrate the power of novels to influence, according to Trilling, “what is properly to be called a political life.”

For Trilling, believing that novels and manners could impact political life required believing that events in a novel were as “real” as those beyond the novel. Initially, tendencies represented to Laskell a different reality, one sequestered from quotidian life. Strikingly, he thought they possessed what seems like a New Critical vision of aesthetic autonomy. Susan’s condition is “a thing that he could believe only for its own kind of truth. If it was a fact at all, it was not so much a fact in life as a fact in a poem” (240). But Susan’s death proves Laskell wrong and suggests a lethal commerce between facts in poems and facts in life. If her condition seems like a fact in a poem, it is nonetheless the case that Laskell’s interpretation of a poem, Blake’s, changes the very fact of her life by activating that condition. Susan’s is a death by poetry, one made possible by the framing of that poem within a novel. This was to Trilling a compelling model of how the political novel might engage and change the ostensible reality of traditional political life. Indeed, with a similar model in mind many years later, he would toy with the notion that his novel had changed the history of American liberalism.

Trilling speculates in his 1975 introduction to the novel that Whittaker Chambers and *The Middle of the Journey* lent each other whatever political reality they might be said to possess. *The Middle of the Journey* became a novel at all because of the character based on Chambers, Maxim; Trilling recalls how, “wholly unbidden,” Maxim “made his appearance” (xix) in what Trilling first thought of as a *nouvelle*. As Trilling sees it, the *nouvelle*, or short story, is a thematically explicit form, subject to paraphrase. “It needn’t be a total betrayal of a *nouvelle* to say what it is ‘about.’ Mine was to be about death—about what had happened to the way death is conceived by the enlightened consciousness of the modern age” (xx). But Maxim’s surprise entrance transformed Trilling’s death-preoccupied *nouvelle* into a novel, the form that was to Trilling the best guardian of the middle-class power about which he dreamed. “Chambers was the first person I ever knew,” Trilling recalls, “whose commitment to radical politics was meant to be definitive of his whole moral being, the controlling element of his existence” (xxi). In the novel that Maxim helps create, Laskell will learn to make his own existence and moral being the controlling element of his commitment to liberal politics.

But the more surprising claim that Trilling makes in his introduction is of a different order entirely. First, he reminds us that Chambers was a pivotal player in postwar American anti-Communism. Without Chambers, there is no successful prosecution of Alger Hiss. Without the successful prosecution of Alger Hiss, there is very possibly no Joseph McCarthy and no Red Scare. Most signally, without the successful prosecution of Alger Hiss, there is most probably no President Richard Nixon. We might extend this logic still further: Trilling was dead before the American public elected Ronald Reagan to the nation’s highest office; but the critic was alive when Reagan credited Chambers with converting him from a New Deal Democrat to a conservative bent on defunding New Deal programs. Had Trilling lived, and written his introduction later than he did, he might therefore have added that Chambers played a decisive role in the breaking apart of the American welfare state. Did Trilling’s novel facilitate that breaking apart? As we have seen, Maxim wants a job at *The New Era* because he thinks that he will become a fact in life by becoming a fact in a journal. Maxim wants to be part of that publication because he believes “he was not safe unless he acquired what he kept calling an existence by becoming a public

fact" (74). Appearing in print, on the masthead of a literary journal, Maxim will secure a new-found reality. This speaks, in turn, to the relation that Trilling suggests in his introduction between *The New Era* and *The Middle of the Journey*. Trilling does for Whittaker Chambers what *The New Era* does for Maxim: confer a unique existence upon him by rendering him a more or less literary fact. Trilling recalls in his introduction that, one year before Chambers became a "historical figure" (xvi) in the Hiss case, the still-obscure man became a "political character" (154) in Trilling's novel. When Maxim walks unbidden into that novel, Chambers is writing for *Time*—his name appears in print, but he is irrelevant to national politics. One year after Trilling's novel, he is not only relevant but central. Who could resist speculating on the nature of this change? Was it not the case, Trilling coyly suggests, that his novel gave Chambers the political reality he would need to enter into mainstream American politics? Perhaps he made Chambers available for national politics by granting him in fictional form an "unquestionable social existence" (xxvi). Then again, perhaps he made Chambers available for those politics by granting him, more simply, an existence as yet untroubled by social or political ambition. In Trilling's novel, the soon-to-be historical figure is allowed, for one brief moment, "just—to—BE." [A]