

Trilling's Second Life:
The Critical Return to Lionel Trilling and its
Application in Contemporary Fiction

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the implications of the recent revival of interest in the ideas of Lionel Trilling. It also explores, through creative practice, how the concepts he espoused might be applied to the writing of fiction today.

Trilling's view of literature, culture, morality and their relationship to each other, as expressed in his major critical publications, is evaluated. Reasons for his dominant influence as a literary and cultural critic in the 1940s and 50s are advanced. His fiction is analysed for its relevance to his broader ideas and its value for the creative undertaking that forms part of this thesis.

The exegesis reviews the criticism of Trilling's work that began in the 1960s, and the shifting literary and cultural attitudes that led to his marginalisation; it then considers the reasons for the recent return of enthusiasm for Trilling's writings. Aesthetic and moral philosophers began this revival when, like Trilling, they applied the concept of the moral imagination to fiction. The work of literary critics and scholars who have also recently re-discovered Trilling is cited in support of the proposition that his views are once again relevant to literary scholarship and practice.

Finally the exegesis argues that Trilling's ideas were not necessarily antithetical to those of the postmodernists and in some respects may have been their precursor. It proposes that Trilling's "second life" brings back into focus values relating to the role of literature that have resonance in the contemporary world and implications for the practice of creative writing. Practice-led research is undertaken in the form of a writer's notebook, which applies, by creative observation and reflection, the ideas investigated in the exegesis.

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Statement by Candidate

This thesis is an original work, researched and written by me, and has not been presented for any degree at any other university or institution.

Where the work of others has been referred to, full acknowledgement is provided.

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Introduction

This exegesis is part of a practice led thesis. The creative section consists of a literary notebook with entries recording ideas and observations and containing vignettes or scenes towards a novel. The novel is set in Sydney during the years 1996 to 2007. The characters react to and are affected by the national and international political events of that period, as well as by the quotidian concerns of their private and professional lives.

The novel attempts to convey an implicit connection between moral¹ problems arising in the socio-political arena and similar issues occurring in the personal sphere, as the characters are confronted by a number of ethical choices. Like most fictional texts, the novel strives to draw the reader into full immersion in an imagined world and into empathy with the characters and the moral dilemmas they face.

The exegesis explores the idea of “the moral imagination” as developed in the writings of the literary critic, academic and writer, Lionel Trilling. Trilling’s work extended over a wide range of literary and cultural ideas. The thesis focuses on those aspects of his writings that provide insight into the connection between morality and the imagination and the role of fiction in society. The theoretical frameworks that Trilling used to evaluate fictional texts, as well as the way he approached the rendering of moral dilemmas in his own fiction, is investigated. I pay particular attention to those aspects of Trilling’s work that illuminate the conceptual and technical challenges my creative work encounters.

Any literary scholar wishing to understand the place of Trilling in the history of literary criticism and his relevance to the literary life today is confronted with a puzzle. How was it that such a highly regarded literary critic of the mid-twentieth century, a man whose influence stretched from the academy to the public sphere in a quite profound and celebrated way, was forgotten or ignored by the end of the century? What had happened in the interim to bring this about? And what has occurred recently to bring about a serious revival of interest in this forgotten man and his writings?

¹ I’m aware that in some contexts the terms moral and ethical have slight definitional differences but for the purposes of this thesis they are used interchangeably to convey a meaning which embraces both the set of social rules governing human duty that “ethics” sometimes carries and the individual responsibility seen by in some to be more the province of the term “moral”. In adopting this joint usage I’m following Trilling and others who write about the moral imagination.

By tracing the history of changing attitudes to Trilling's work, from the time when he was a dominant figure in literary circles to the present, I investigate how new theoretical perspectives shifted focus away from the views Trilling held on the role and value of literature. Postmodernist thought resulted in the emergence of a succession of fresh critical and interpretive lenses, and these played a large part in the decline of Trilling's influence. The return of interest in his approach to fiction, with its emphasis on the moral imagination, has implications for the writing and reading of literature today.

Trilling was the kind of literary academic less familiar to us now. His cultural opinions and his book reviews seriously affected public discourse in the whole of the English-speaking world for most of his adult life. He was not only a literary scholar, but also a public intellectual. As Edward Mendelson puts it:

It is hard to recall now the enormous prestige of Lionel Trilling as a literary and social critic during the postwar years, his first collection of essays, is said to have sold more than 70,000 hardback copies. For the first and last time, a literature professor enjoyed the public eminence normally reserved for an economist like John Kenneth Galbraith.

As well as being a critic, Trilling was a creative writer; but while his theoretical and critical output was greeted with acclaim, his one novel and handful of short stories were received less enthusiastically. However, the fact that, as a student of literature, he also engaged in literary practice makes him an ideal subject for study in a creative writing thesis. This is especially so for me because both his theoretical and critical preoccupations, as well as those reflected in his creative works, are similar to the issues I am confronting.

Writing a novel that explores moral issues is fraught with many conceptual and craft challenges such as avoiding didacticism and maintaining awareness of a range of perspectives. These concerns are reflected in the literary notebook that forms part of this thesis. They were also concerns that affected the way Trilling analysed texts and wrote his own fiction

I am not the first person who has set about tracing the history of changing attitudes to Trilling's work. The most notable is John Rodden in *Lionel Trilling and the Critics Opposing Selves*, who concentrates on the rise and fall of Trilling's reputation. I build on

Rodden's work to draw together trends in the evolving theories that shaped literary criticism, in order to see how they might affect our view of fiction today.

The theoretical framework of the exegesis comes partly from the moral and aesthetic philosophers who have been, to some extent, instrumental in stimulating the contemporary revival of academic interest in the broader questions of the nature and purpose of fiction. They have done this in terms that relate closely to the themes that Trilling pursued. However, my central focus is on literary criticism and how interest in concepts such as the moral imagination, social liberalism and humanistic criticism have waxed and waned since the period when Trilling's ascendancy in the field gave them prime currency. At a time when the very future of the novel is being called into question (Self) such issues seem of urgent significance.

My intention is to ensure that ideas drawn from the discipline of philosophy will be used to serve the purposes of my primary focus of interest, which takes place within the discipline of literary criticism. I focus primarily on literary critics such as Rodden, Adam Kirsch and David Bromwich, with the work of philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum and Gregory Currie taking an adjunct role. The exegesis will pose the question for literary criticism: how and why did the theory underpinning literary criticism change between Trilling's time and the present and what are the implications for fiction today? It will pose the question for literary practice: what conceptual and craft issues have to be confronted by the writer who wishes to engage the moral imagination of both herself and her readers?

Chapter 1: Trilling the Critic

This section of the exegesis reviews the salient features of Lionel Trilling's approach to criticism and the principles he espoused in writing about literature more generally. Trilling was interested in the capacity of fiction to convey the complexity, nuance and ambiguity of human experience. His critical writings ranged over many themes and I focus particularly on his advocacy of the concept of the moral imagination and the views he held on the place of literature in a wider cultural and political context. This chapter lays the intellectual foundations upon which the central argument of the exegesis will be developed.

Trilling believed that literature had the potent ability to affect readers and their attitudes and thus influence the culture of the society in which they lived. This belief is reflected in every essay of his most influential critical work, *The Liberal Imagination*. Irving Howe, a friend who knew him well, wrote:

Trilling believed passionately—and taught a whole generation also to believe—in the power of literature, its power to transform, elevate and damage. ... Trilling would circle a work with his fond nervous wariness as if in the presence of some force, some living energy which could not always be kept under proper control—indeed as if he were approaching an elemental power. (30)

Kirsch provides a related assessment, finding that Trilling offers his readers an *experience* of literature rather than a formula with which to measure its worth: “The drama of Trilling’s essays comes from the reaction of a powerfully individual sensibility, not to emotions or human situations or the world as a whole, but to certain texts and ideas” (10).

Trilling also thought fictional texts should illuminate our collective understanding of issues that mattered in the world around us. He saw the literary imagination as a potent tool for promoting awareness of the many facets and nuances of current social, political and ethical issues; for him the political and ethical were intimately entwined.

In the preface to *The Liberal Imagination*, Trilling enunciates what is for him a core proposition, one that surfaces again and again in his critical writings. It is the idea that fiction has a unique capacity to convey the complicated subtleties of human existence:

To the carrying out of the job of criticizing the liberal imagination, literature has a

unique relevance, not merely because so much of modern literature has explicitly directed itself towards politics, but more importantly because literature is the human activity that takes the fullest and most precise account of variousness, possibility, complexity and difficulty. (x)

Evidence for this view can be found all through his work, but an early example comes from a little cited 1946 essay, “The Life of the Novel”, in which he reviews Eleanor Dark’s novel, *The Bitter Box*. In this piece Trilling expresses many of the themes that can be detected in the rest of his work. He praises the novel for the fact that it draws on the most urgent of the socio-political issues confronting the intellectual life of America at the time: attitudes to the Communist Party:

If we want to understand what has been going on in our moral culture to deteriorate our fiction, we could not do better than to begin with this fact: that although the Communist Party has been in existence in this country for more than a quarter-century it, has not appeared in our novels except as a figment. (658)

He deplores the fact that some of his contemporaries have seen morality as “antithetical to politics” and he goes on to define morality as to include:

... politics, but politics as it presents its choices to all elements of the individual, including his imagination and his sense of the quality of his own being, politics as an activity in which the individual stakes all the cherished elements of his being on the chance of securing their safety. (659)

These were themes that he was to explore in his own novel, *The Middle of the Journey*, which I examine in chapter 2. Suffice it to say that Trilling thought that the relationship between an individual’s moral understanding—how much he or she is prepared to cede to the needs of others—is crucial to the formation of that individual’s political position. Understanding that moral attitudes are at the heart of what shapes politics was, in his view, of central importance to the development of an effective democracy.

Trilling was a moral realist in the philosophical sense. He felt that certain moral propositions were objectively factual and he believed in the concept of intrinsic value that some things are important for their own sake. He felt compelled for these reasons to

examine literature within a moral frame. What he urged was the exercise of the “moral imagination” to achieve understanding of situations and viewpoints that may otherwise seem alien. The essays contained in *The Liberal Imagination* are primarily addressed to American intellectuals who, like Trilling, were political and cultural liberals. Through his analysis of literary texts, Trilling urged his readers to exercise their moral imagination in approaching politics and literature and to avoid rigid ideological positions. He wanted his fellow liberals to develop a capacity for moral imagination. Trilling never defined what he meant by the moral imagination, however the definition offered by Bromwich captures the sense in which Trilling used the idea:

This is the power that compels us to grant the highest possible reality and largest conceivable claim to a thought action or person that is not our own and not close to us in any obvious way. The force of the idea of the moral imagination is to deny that we can ever know ourselves sufficiently to settle on a named identity that prescribes our conduct or affiliations. Moral imagination therefore seems to me inseparable from the freedom that is possible in society. (xii)

Trilling elaborated on the concept of moral realism in his study of E. M. Forster. For him, moral realism was not just “the awareness of morality itself but of the contradictions paradoxes and dangers of living the moral life” (*E. M. Forster* 11-12). He further asserts that the novelist has much more capacity to teach this than the moralist. The novelist can demonstrate the ambiguity of human motivation and the underlying complexities of moral choice through his character’s actions dialogue and thoughts.

Trilling saw literature’s unique ability as playing an important role in extending human capacity to imagine solutions to complex human interactions and he described himself as operating at “the dark and bloody crossroads where literature and politics meet” (*Liberal Imagination* 11). The fact that his views were very welcome at the time that he was writing, so soon after the Second World War in the shadow of the Holocaust and in the midst of the Cold War is not surprising. Perhaps pressing world issues today are the reason for the return of interest in these ideas now. Finding some kind of common core moral principles to provide a basis for negotiation in ending international cross-cultural and inter-religious strife becomes more urgent when the world is in turmoil.

Trilling had the capacity to see all sides of a situation and then to produce an often aphoristic

overview, a mode of proceeding that was condemned by some, and praised by others. Louis Menand, in a major essay in the *New Yorker*, both complains about and admires this characteristic. Drawing heavily on Trilling's highly personal, self-critical, journals in order to write a judgmental account of Trilling the man, he nevertheless acknowledges "I became a critic because I wanted to write sentences like 'This intense conviction of the existence of self apart from culture is as culture well knows its noblest and most generous achievement.' ... I just liked the way Trilling could turn a thought."

Statements such as the one admired by Menand displayed much more than an ability to turn a thought. Trilling's characteristic style, in which he combined thoughts that seemed superficially oppositional and found a way to use the resulting ambiguity to produce a deeper insight, reflected a principle that runs like a bass note through all his thinking. This is the principle of negative capability adopted from John Keats who wrote: "that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts" and transformed by Trilling (Keats 71). Trilling developed the concept to argue against uncompromising and simplistic ideological positions and for an appreciation of the complexity of motivation and behaviour.

We see this awareness of the value of paradox expressed, for example, in his much admired essay on Henry James's *The Princess Casamassima*. Trilling describes the hero's mental state at the conclusion of the novel as having achieved "perfect equilibrium", for although he has acquired a new sense of the "glory of the world" he has also come to understand the nature of "social horror" (*Liberal Imagination* 58-93). These terms—"equilibrium", "social horror"—are much more specific in their meaning than the traditional "good and evil," and they carry with them the possibility of the kind of nuance and ambiguity characteristic of human experience. Ambiguity was Trilling's stock in trade, his method a kind of compressed dialectic.

I submit that the most fundamental binary that Trilling struggled to integrate, not only in his evaluation of literature, but also to a large extent in his own life, was the tension between the Classical and the Romantic view of the world. He saw the merit in the Classical idea that reason should dominate over feeling at the same time as he recognized the value of the reverse view held by the Romantics—one putting emphasis on obligations to society, order and peace, the other stressing the importance of the individual, disruption and revolution. This tension played out in Trilling's struggle to define himself as a disruptive creative writer against the socially responsible academic and cultural critic

discussed in the next chapter.

It was Trilling's willingness, even compulsion, to see the value in both sides of an argument that characterised almost everything he wrote and frustrated those who wanted to be able to assign his views to a pigeonhole. Richard Sennett, a sociologist who knew Trilling, paraphrased one of Trilling's stated views about the interaction between biology and culture:

... culture can never wholly nurture human life. Even at the hands of the worst tyranny people have a natural source of resistance, which lies, however vague the terms, in the integrity of the human body and its desires. Once I pressed Trilling about this: 'You have no position you are always in between,' I said. 'Between,' he replied, 'is the only honest place to be.' (210)

Trilling was very much pre-occupied with the relationship between the individual self and society. He was deeply interested in the notion of culture: how it was developed within a particular society, how it affected politics and how it shaped the individual. Rodden has pointed out that Trilling spent the first few years of his life as a literary critic but "after mid-century he channelled his talents into cultural criticism" (*Lionel Trilling* 4). However, the cultural criticism was always inspired by literature. The experience of reading James, Jane Austen, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Keats, among many others, acted as launching pads for his reflections. In doing this he adopted a kind of hermeneutical phenomenology similar to that of Paul Ricoeur.

Trilling had an ability to question pre-determined positions—even his own. He had a willingness to offer serious criticism of his own liberal view of the world, as is demonstrated in all the essays collected in *The Liberal Imagination*. My contention, which I explore in more detail in chapter 4, is that, far from being irrelevant to the literary critics that followed him, Trilling was to some extent their precursor and that a reconsideration of some of his forgotten principles will expand the range of tools available both for the creation and the criticism of fictional texts. In the next chapter, I examine Trilling's creative writing, his attempts to engage the moral imagination through fiction, and the insights his creative writing provides for the writer today.

Chapter 2: Trilling the Writer of Fiction

This chapter will examine Trilling's small output of fiction and his personal notebooks, and from them draw insights about creative writing practice. We will see how his fiction displays a number of successful techniques for capturing how belief systems affect the way people live and the choices they make. The chapter will also provide some cautionary notes by arguing that his scenes of debate and exposition are less successful holding up narrative and sometimes taking on a lecturing tone. Trilling's notebooks will help inform the examination of his fiction. His life, as well as his work, provides useful insights into the possibilities and pitfalls of writing fiction.

Most writers experience self doubt and react to negative criticism but few find themselves in the exposed position of Trilling, who was not only a creative writer but also an exceptionally prominent critic and literary standard bearer. Although this situation caused him some personal difficulties, it also put him in a peculiarly good position to reflect, with some penetration, on the writing process.

In 1971, in a public lecture at Purdue University, Trilling amazed his audience by stating that he thought of himself as a novelist rather than a critic:

I am always surprised when I hear myself referred to as a critic ... The plan that did please my thought was certainly literary, but what it envisaged was the career of a novelist. To this intention, criticism, when eventually I began to practice it, was always secondary, an afterthought: in short not a vocation but an avocation. (*Last Decade* 227)

Excerpts from his notebooks published by his wife in the *Partisan Review* demonstrate that he longed to live the literary life as a novelist, not as an academic and critic, and could not admire his success as a critic in the way that others did. Menand, responding to the publication of Trilling's unfinished novel *The Journey Abandoned*, goes further than is justified in using the notebook excerpts to illustrate his view that Trilling was a bitter, disappointed, and rather unpleasant individual.

Menand titled the piece “Regrets Only” and sub-titled it “Lionel Trilling and his Discontents”. When Trilling wrote in his journal, as quoted by Menand: “I have one of the great reputations in the academic world—this thought makes me retch” he was indeed expressing a feeling of revulsion at being so highly regarded for something that came easily to him. But he was expressing it in the extreme terms that many of us find ourselves using in notebooks not intended for publication. Elsewhere in the notebook he wrote:

I hear on all sides of the extent of my reputation—which some even call ‘fame’. It is the thing I have most wanted from childhood ... and now that I seem to have it I have no understanding whatever of its basis—of what it is that makes people respond to what I say, for I think of it as of a simplicity and of a naivety almost extreme. (qtd. in Menand)

The recognition Trilling craved was for his novels, where he felt his ideal of engaging the moral imagination could be better fulfilled. His frustration was also expressed in his passionate response to a letter he was shown that Ernest Hemingway had sent to the *New Yorker* in 1933.

A crazy letter written when he was drunk—self-revealing, arrogant, scared, trivial, absurd: yet felt how right such a man is compared to the ‘good minds’ of my university life—how he will produce and mean something to the world ... And how far-far-far I am ... from being a writer. (“From the Notebooks” 498)

This entry, along with other painfully revealing passages, suggests that Trilling’s view of the kind of person a writer should be was very much based on a Romantic conception of the writer as an untamed outsider. The conflict between the ambition for social respect and the ambition to be the sort of person he thought a writer should be created a psychological difficulty for him:

But sometimes I feel I pay for the position, not with learning, but with my talent ... supposing I were to dare to believe that one could be a professor! and a man! and a writer—what arrogance and defiance of convention. Yet deeply I dare to believe that. (“From the Notebooks” 511)

As an immigrant Jew in the US in the 1930s and 40s Trilling would almost certainly have felt some pressure to seek the security of a respected place in the establishment. Moreover

he was acutely cognizant not only of the importance of an ethical law-abiding society but also of his own personal responsibilities to others. As his notion of what constituted the right kind of persona for a writer was so proscribed, an inner tension was created. In consequence he approached his creative writing in an overly cerebral way.

This approach is particularly evident in his one published novel, *The Middle of the Journey*. It was published in 1948, two years before the publication of his collected critical essays in *The Liberal Imagination*. The novel was received on the whole positively—though with mixed reviews—whereas the critical work was greeted with extravagant praise. *The Middle of the Journey* addresses what was undoubtedly one of the great philosophical and political questions of the time: the issue of whether the principles and practice of communism should be accepted or rejected by intellectuals such as Trilling who had supported those political values in the 1930s. It was an issue that reached into deeper levels of human experience than just the political; indeed, in a different political form, it still has resonance today. Through his fictional characters Trilling was able to give flesh to his view that politics was essentially a moral issue, and that adherence to a political belief system reflected a person's broader ethical stance.

By taking his group of middle class characters to a small hamlet in Connecticut where they interact with less socio-economically privileged neighbours, Trilling is able to expose the gap between their belief systems and their motivations and choices as individuals. The do-gooder couple, Arthur and Nancy Crooms, articulate a leftist position of social equality, but their views are not reflected in their attitudes to their neighbours. The hero John Laskell demonstrates one of Trilling's central tenets of desirable behaviour by changing his views in response to experience and reflection over the course of the novel. The Crooms' rigidity of mind and fixed ideology is exposed when a mutual friend, the communist Gifford Maxim is introduced into the mix. Maxim has been a communist spy, has experienced a massive change of heart, left the Party, and is now in fear of his life under threat from his former Stalinist colleagues. In response he has become a religious and conservative reactionary, and he asserts that individual responsibility overrides social determinism. Trilling shows that although Maxim has moved politically from far-left to far-right, in the process he has not moved far at all, swapping one extreme authoritarian ideology for another.

The Crooms display a mindset Trilling found reprehensible—rigid, self-righteous and

uncritically wedded to a pre-determined political position. Maxim, the ideologue, is drawn to dangerous extremes. Laskell, on the other hand, represents Trilling's own philosophical position. In a long final debate with the others Laskell says: "An absolute freedom from responsibility—that much of a child none of us can be. An absolute responsibility—that much of a divine or metaphysical essence none of us has" (*Middle of the Journey* 318). Through Laskell, Trilling, as always, finds his place in the middle of the argument. He finds the moral prescriptiveness of some of his fellow liberals as suspect as that of communism or the religious right. He prefers to rely on each individual's imagination to appreciate the experiences and backgrounds of other people and to take personal responsibility for his or her own actions.

Given the capacity for self-criticism revealed in his notebooks, Trilling focused on the negative rather than the many positive reviews his book attracted. He wrote in his journal: "The attack on my novel that it is gray bloodless, without passion, is always made with great personal feeling, with anger—How dared I presume" ("From the Notebooks" 509). Some critics pointed out what they felt was an over-riding intellectualism in the novel. Robert Warshow's review claimed that "Trilling, lacking an aesthetically effective relationship to experience, is forced to translate experience into ideas, embodying these ideas into characters and giving his plot the form of an intellectual discussion reinforced by events" (545).

There did seem in some reviewers an unwillingness to allow a leading critic a second successful role as a novelist. Yet many praised the novel for the effectiveness with which it dramatised big ideas. Mark Schorer, a much respected Berkeley professor and himself a novelist, wrote: "What one admires first about 'The Middle of the Journey' ... is its assurance—its confidence in its own best qualities, literacy and intelligence ... and the rare grace with which it does precisely what it wishes to do" (114).

I would argue that the novel contains a successful rendering of the way people think through ideas and how this plays out in a contested space with friends whose views differ. However, it is remarkably difficult to bring these concepts into full realisation through dialogue, reflective monologues and argument. In fiction ideas need to be dramatised. Some of the scenes of action in Trilling's novel are real and effective. There is, for example, an original and quite moving sex scene—never easy to achieve—and natural interactions with some of the locals including a child, but they do not sufficiently underpin

the ideas the philosophical dialogue has brought into play. These constitute cautionary notes for writers, such as myself, who are interested in creating a novel of ideas where characters are confronted by choices for which they are unprepared.

What was becoming clear for Trilling at this stage of his life was that whatever his personal writing ambitions he was gaining increasing success as a critic. After the mixed reactions to *The Middle of the Journey*, it was thought until quite recently that he never wrote another novel. His wife Diana in her memoir of their life together, *The Beginning of the Journey*, refers to a short story, “The Lesson and the Secret”, which she describes as “a story of no consequence” (although she did include it in the collection *Of This Time, of That Place, and Other Stories*). She says, “I think it was intended to be part of a novel” which, as she puts it, “was soon abandoned” (D. Trilling, 384).

Geraldine Murphy, an academic from the City College of New York, was researching in the library at Columbia University when she came across a Trilling manuscript consisting of about a third of a novel with notes. She saw that it provided some interesting insights into Trilling’s preoccupations, and that some of it was beautifully written. She published it as an unfinished novel giving it the title *The Journey Abandoned* and writing her own introduction. Trilling had set out to write a novel that built on the experience of producing *The Middle of the Journey* and the criticism it attracted. Even as *The Middle of the Journey* went to press the critic in him had seen some of its problems. In a letter to Richard Chase, a Columbia colleague, he confided that he hoped for a “richer, less shaped, less intellectual, more open” work, adding: “I think the next one will be better” (*Journey Abandoned* xi).

This manuscript reflects something of the struggles that Trilling experienced as a writer and an academic. The young hero Vincent Hammell is torn between his desire for success and his desire to pursue his pure ideals as a writer. The main middle-aged character, Harold Outram, is given these words:

Ah yes—your generation no longer worships the novel. In my time it was the novel or nothing ... It had to be big and explosively honest—you’d think we were collecting dynamite grain by grain, you’d think we were constructing a bomb. We expected to blow everything to bits with our honesty. (*Middle of the Journey* 54)

Trilling's comment on why he ultimately abandoned his second novel is informative about the process of writing fiction. He notes that he was stuck creatively and could not find a way of getting to the middle part of the novel:

The first part, after many approximations and failures, did grow into something and it grew with a kind of unconsciousness... Sometimes a few words in one scene suggested another... And I am experiencing discouragement because this kind of unconscious movement of the mind isn't now going on. But what I forget... is that for the first part I had in mind a very clear scenario; it was on this that the creation grew; it was the stick for the vine. (*Journey Abandoned* xxxvi)

Trilling never seemed to find the "scenario" or "stick" on which the next part of the novel could be built.

Trilling's short stories were more confident. The five short stories collected by his wife and published in 1979 under the title *Of This Time, of That Place, and Other Stories* all reflect in their different ways views that Trilling expressed in his critical essays. The titular story is told from the point of view of a professor, Joseph Howe, who is also a poet. He has in his class two students who embody the extremes of Trilling's own inner conflict. Ferdinand Tertan is a brilliant student but eccentric and regarded as slightly mad. Howe recognizes the creative spirit in his strange student. The other student, Blackburn, is a ruthless, selfish manipulator of unbridled ambition but little talent. He is destined to succeed in a world that favours such qualities. Tertan ends up being declared insane and, with Howe's acquiescence, is committed to an asylum. Yet the question is posed: who is really more sane, Tertan or Blackburn?

Trilling's view, that the best fiction leads the reader to contemplate ethical alternatives, to imagine and then make specific moral judgments, is also displayed in "The Other Margaret". In this short story, a young girl named Margaret uses a pre-constructed liberal frame of reference to excuse and defend the viciously bad behaviour of the family's maid, also named Margaret. When she is confronted with direct evidence of the maid's inexcusable actions she is devastated by its collision with her liberal prejudice. Her father is overcome with a sense of helplessness in his desire to comfort his daughter:

But Elwin knew that it was not for the other Margaret that she wept but because she

had with her own eyes seen the actual possibility of what she herself might do, the insupportable fact of her own moral life. (*Of This Time* 37)

In another of his less well-known stories, “Notes on a Departure,” I came across a passage with direct bearing on the actual process of creative writing. As with all other aspects of Trilling’s life and work it provides the kind of insight available to a person who is engaged in thinking about literature at the same time as she is writing it—a position of special interest to someone involved in the academic discipline of creative writing. At the end of “Notes on a Departure” the protagonist, a young man who feels misplaced, alienated and inadequate in the small university town where he is teaching, at last finds his internal direction and realises his vocation. The passage articulates very precisely how Trilling saw the experience of writing a novel:

He felt not happy, not eager, not sternly strong, but complete. He was complete not as a story is complete that a writer sends to the printer but as an idea for that story becomes complete in the mind of a writer over many months; for the idea will come to the writer perhaps as a bald sentence, a mere static situation, and as it rests in his mind it begins to take on little additions of significance, dropping some and cultivation others, growing and forming itself until the writer finds it sufficiently full to begin to translate on paper. And as the writer sits down to the paper he knows and is afraid that, however complete and promising seemed the idea, words will perhaps betray it, will probably expose it cruelly, will certainly change it, and so he writes with the probability of failure on his pencil. But as he sits down, though he is not elated nor happy, nor has he any time for any posture of heroism in the face of this fear, he knows that his thus sitting down and beginning his first paragraph is the only thing he can do and the best moment of his life. (*Of This Time* 56)

Reading Trilling’s fiction provides interesting models for the kind of situations, characters and dialogue that allow a natural expression of ideas. His fiction is designed to display the complexity and difficulty of the moral issues that each person grapples with in coming to terms with surrounding cultural pressures. In particular, both his completed novel and his abandoned one offer ways of arriving at convincingly effective dramatic and reflective scenarios as well as demonstrating some of the hazards involved in writing ideas-based

fiction. The insights that Trilling's fiction provides have proved helpful to me in the process of writing my own novel, which treads different but related ground.

Chapter 3: Trilling Criticised and Marginalised

At the time of Trilling's ascendancy in the field of literary criticism it would have been hard to foresee how thoroughly he was to recede from relevance during the two to three decades after his death. Postmodernist thought arrived while he was still alive (he died in November 1975) and it introduced into the academic discipline of English literature a very different paradigm from the one that had been practised by Trilling and his contemporaries. The idea became accepted that his writings were no longer relevant or even that they were inimical to proper textual analysis. In addition, shifts in American politics resulted in attacks on Trilling's cultural and political writings both from the left and right of politics.

This chapter surveys the most significant of the critical attacks upon Trilling and sets them in their historical, theoretical and political contexts. An analysis of what happened to Trilling's ideas, especially his concept of the moral imagination and its value in literary fiction, will be helpful in understanding the context in which these ideas are now being revived and what this will mean for the practice of creative writing as well as literary criticism in the twenty-first century. I will show that, rather than holding views that were antithetical to many of the principles on which postmodernist thought is based, Trilling's work was in some respects its precursor. The relationship between literary criticism and literary practice is not always an obvious one, however I do contend that understanding the developments that occurred in literary criticism during the period when Trilling's approach gave way to his successors, has implications for fiction writing today.

Trilling was a cultural critic as well as a literary critic. He believed that literature was relevant to politics in that literature could assist in shaping the imagination to appreciate the complexity of socio-political situations. More importantly, via the moral imagination literature could lead a reader to a better appreciation of perspectives different from their own. Trilling's own political views were very much a response to the times in which he lived and reflected his feeling that we should evaluate issues according to experience rather than via prescribed ideology. He was himself a liberal, but at the same time he criticised liberalism for its tendency to become narrow, smug, bureaucratic and dogmatic (*Liberal Imagination* xiv).

However after the publication of the essay collections *The Opposing Self* (1955) and *A Gathering of Fugitives* (1956), many started to suggest that his politics had moved to the right. For example, Joseph Frank titled his 1956 essay “Lionel Trilling and the Conservative Imagination” and judged Trilling as being guilty of a conservative form of social passivity: “it is of the utmost importance ... not to endow social passivity and quietism *as such* with the halo of aesthetic transcendence. Mr. Trilling regrettably does not always keep this boundary well defined” (298). Frank asserts throughout this essay (296-309), that Trilling’s acceptance of a link between beauty and truth, between aesthetics and morality reveals a conservative turn of mind, but he advances no real argument as to why such a link should be associated with conservatism. This essay represented a relatively polite beginning to an increasingly confident rejection of the principles Trilling had always stood for.

In December 1965 the attack on Trilling grew more heated. In the newly established *New York Review of Books* Robert Mazzocco, a poet and essayist who was beginning to emerge as an influential figure in the New Left in America, launched an unequivocal assault on Trilling’s work and reputation in a review of *Beyond Culture*. He wrote that “the usual impression is that of trudging uphill scanning hazy vistas martyred with abstractions, pestered by fuddy-duddy phrases” (20) and he concluded:

Looking back whether these essays represent, by and large, an interminable muddle, or a subtlety refined beyond the point of civilisation I do not know but I imagine the latter estimate is the truer. Whatever the case in the end I’m afraid Professor Trilling’s book is really beyond criticism and in that sense I suppose beyond culture as well. (Mazzocco 24)

Mazzocco’s essay sparked an inter-generational conflict, with Trilling’s contemporaries and admirers defending him vigorously. It marked the start of a steady decline in Trilling’s influence and reputation.

Mazzocco’s attack was primarily a response to the preface to *Beyond Culture* (1965) in which Trilling sets out what had been worrying him during the ten years since his previous book, *A Gathering of Fugitives*, was published. In the preface, Trilling asserts that the task of literature is to react against the normative views of the dominant culture and that the role of the writer is to participate in “the adversary project” (xviii), a project involving

opposition to, and exposure of, the assumptions and attitudes that underpin the power structures in the society in which the writer lives and works.

Trilling recognised that the adversary project presented painful choices for the writer. Several of the protagonists in his short stories as well as those in both his published and unpublished novel struggled with the choice of either pursuing the ideal of questioning the establishment as a writer or partaking of its fruits as a compliant, successful citizen. Indeed, the struggle was one that Trilling himself was engaged in all his life. It is probably best demonstrated through the character of Irving Howe, the professor from whose point of view the short story “Of This Time, of That Place” is written. Throughout that story Howe is torn between his life as a poet and his respect for creativity and non-conformity on the one hand, and his obedience to the strictures of university bureaucracy as well as his own guilty enjoyment of a position of power on the other.

The choices presented by the adversary project are reflected in the preface to *Beyond Culture*. In the essay Trilling expresses the worry that the counter-cultural forces that he saw around him on university campuses were made up of activists wanting to take power and control. He saw this as blunting the role they should be occupying in the adversary project:

Any historian of the literature of the modern age will take virtually for granted the adversary intention, the actually subversive intention, that characterizes modern writing—he will perceive its clear purpose of detaching the reader from the habits of thought and feeling that the larger culture imposes, of giving him a ground and a vantage point from which to judge and condemn, and perhaps revise, the culture that produces him (*Beyond Culture* xii-xiii)

The position that Trilling took—especially as it was developed in his later work—was seen by the left as a counselling against political activism, although it probably came more from his feelings about some of the more violent aspects of counter-cultural activism. Indeed, Rodden has pointed out that Trilling “criticised the student disturbances at Columbia in 1968 especially the strong campus presence of the Weathermen a terrorist group that grew out of the radical wing of Students for a Democratic Society” (“Reputation and the Sociological Imagination”).

Once Mazocco had pulled the great liberal from his pedestal the floodgates of criticism from the left were open. After the publication of *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972), despite a couple of admiring reviews from England (Shirley Robin Letwin in *The Spectator* and John Bayley in *The Listener*), Trilling was the target of censure and even derision. Roger Sale's response in the *Hudson Review* was typical: "The man it must be admitted just loves the sound of his own orotundity ... Trilling treats himself as an institution and so he can never speak with anything less than full assurance" (240-47).

Already in the 1970s Trilling's elegant, high patrician tone, his balanced sentences and elaborately contextualised arguments were out of date. For students prepared to come to grips with Heidegger, Derrida and Foucault, Trilling's style—heavily influenced as it was by Henry James and Matthew Arnold—perhaps made them think of their grandfathers. In consequence the insights he was conveying and the confronting ideas calling for fresh thinking about accepted standards seemed old-fashioned rather than radical.

By 1986, Cornel West, a leading African American intellectual at Princeton, a Marxist and activist declared Trilling to be "an intellectual dead-end" and "the godfather of the contemporary neo-conservatives." (233). He quoted approvingly from the old Joseph Frank essay, which had done much to turn the tide against Trilling's reputation. West approves of Trilling's style and appreciates his advocacy of complexity but in the end finds that Trilling's failure to deal with racial issues or with the Holocaust in his essays disqualifies him from being worthy of the level of admiration he has been accorded in the past (233-42). Like West, many thinkers on the left interpreted Trilling's call to see all sides of a question—and to avoid making judgements on the basis of a narrow ideological framework—as a sign of conservatism.

Both the right and the left of politics have fought over where Trilling's true allegiance lay. His far-left colleagues have criticised his moderation. The neo-conservatives have seen, in his opposition to rigid left wing ideology, support for their views. Norman Podhoretz, who like Trilling had been a left-liberal anti-communist had, unlike Trilling, moved to the right and became publicly active as part of the neo-conservative movement. After Trilling's death Podhoretz claimed that Trilling's position had moved too, but that he had been too equivocal, too passive, too uncertain to go public (57-103). Trilling's widow was outraged and vigorously and cogently denied that her husband in any way supported the neo-conservative agenda (D. Trilling 403-05).

Ultimately however the debate over Trilling's political leanings overlooks one of his most deeply held beliefs: he detested extreme ideology that pre-determined an individual's judgements and left no room for the moral imagination. He was concerned to combat this kind of thinking whether it be of the left or of the right. And he believed that literature had a unique role to play in resisting its evils. He put his feelings neatly in his lecture "Manners, Morals, and the Novel":

Some paradox of our nature leads us, when once we have made our fellow men the objects of our enlightened interest, to go on to make them the objects of our pity, then of our wisdom, ultimately of our coercion. It is to prevent this corruption, the most ironic and tragic that man knows, that we stand in need of the moral realism, which is the product of the free play of the moral imagination. (*Liberal Imagination* 221-22)

His belief in the power of the moral imagination to help shape our culture, to forestall the worst excesses of the ideologues, to prevent us from being driven by zealotry to blind cruelty, was at the heart of his love of literature and the methods he used to evaluate it.

The criticism he received from the political forces in the US were directed at his role as a cultural critic which he exercised via literary criticism. Different criticism came from some literary critics who noted his lack of theoretical interest in the use of language.

At the same time that Trilling was pursuing his idea of literature as cultural criticism the parallel movement of the New Criticism, which had as its central tenet a close exegetical reading of the language of a text, also had a strong following. By the time the new structuralism and post-structuralism had arrived in America from Europe, Trilling's work began to look decidedly unsophisticated. In contrast to the new ideas his analysis did not seem to have any consistent, structured theoretical base.

In addition, Trilling's later work on the self, heavily influenced by Freud, was focused on an integrated self. Displayed in the essays collected in *The Opposing Self* (1955) and *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1971) was his struggle to come to terms, to explain and to use, that great binary—the natural biological self and the influence of culture and society in shaping an individual: "With such energy as contrives that the centre shall hold, that the circumference of the self keep unbroken that the person be an integer impenetrable perdurable and autonomous in being if not in action" (Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*

99).

The idea of a crafted self, a life as a work of art governed by intention rather than impulse is developed further in the essays “Art, Will, and Necessity” and “The Uncertain Future of the Humanistic Educational Ideal”, both published in *The Last Decade*. Set against such a view, central as it was to Trilling’s later thought, it can be seen that the deconstructionist notion of a decentred self—a self fully determined by culture, that changes over time, fragments and re-groups—looked very different and more relevant to contemporary experience.

However, Trilling’s arguments throughout all his work centred on the struggle to integrate opposites, whether it be in ideas or life. Reflected in everything he wrote was his dialectical mind, which always saw both sides of the question, and recognised the merits and difficulties of each. The tension between the needs of the individual and the effects and demands of the culture—which both shaped him and laid obligations on him—was his central preoccupation. In *Beyond Culture*, he wrote: “The intense conviction of the existence of the self apart from culture is, as culture knows, its noblest and most generous achievement” (102). As Menand put it, “Trilling saw everything under a double aspect: as a condition and a consequence a trend and a backlash, a pathway to enlightenment and a dead end of self deception.”

Trilling argued for the vital role of fiction in communicating the complexities of the individual’s relationship to society in his essay “Art and Fortune” (*Liberal Imagination* 255-80) in which he mounted a strong defence of the novel of ideas such as his own *The Middle of the Journey*. Trilling addressed the perennial issue of whether the novel has a future and mounted the argument that, to ensure a secure future, the novel would need to avoid the rigid thought patterns imposed by fixed ideologies and open itself up to a wide range of different points of view. He felt a new way of writing, a less prescribed way—a more subversive way—was the only form in which the novel could survive:

In our society the simplest person is involved with ideas. Every person we meet in the course of our daily life, no matter how unlettered he may be, is groping with sentences towards a sense of his life and his position in it; and he has what almost always goes with an impulse to ideology, a good deal of animus and

anger...ideological organization has cut across class organization generating loyalties and animosities which are perhaps even more intense than those of class. (*Liberal Imagination* 274-75)

Trilling never mentioned, in a theoretical sense, issues of gender or colonialism, although he did to some extent treat race and class in, for example, his short story “The Other Margaret.” But his call for a consideration of ideology, for the need to open up thinking beyond prescribed confines, to challenge the established view and let in light from perspectives other than the mainstream, arguably laid groundwork for postmodernism.

For instance, I would argue that Trilling’s influence played at least a part in preparing the intellectual ground in which the movement towards the creation of the great American postmodern novels could take root. And the roll call of influential writers and literary thought leaders who were his students and eager disciples—from Allen Ginsberg to Podhoretz—meant that these ideas were spread throughout the US and elsewhere. Novels considered to be postmodern and that deal with ideas that have socio-political relevance—from Thomas Pynchon to Jonathan Franzen, Angela Carter to Salman Rushdie—seem to be in some way an answer to Trilling’s plea for fresh ideas to be in play, for ancient shibboleths to be discarded. Indeed the literary developments of the second half of the twentieth century such as intertextuality, metafiction and magical realism are examples of the imagination engaged in free play. Feminist, postcolonial, reader response, queer theory and eco fiction in some ways are all invitations to the exercise of the moral imagination and certainly give voice to the marginalized points of view and the non-mainstream ideas that Trilling felt were needed for the novel to have a future.

Chapter 4: Trilling Resurgent

After his spectacular fall from favour, Trilling's contribution to literature gradually began to be re-evaluated and re-appreciated. To work out why, we must look first, not to English academics or critics, but to moral and aesthetic philosophers. Their appreciation of Trilling's work came as a corollary of renewed philosophical interest in the concept of the moral imagination. This chapter traces the return of the moral imagination as explored initially by philosophers and then gradually by English literature academics and critics as postmodernism's influence began to fade and ethical issues gained more prominence in works of fiction. The re-assessment of the concept of the moral imagination eventually led to Trilling's writings coming back into vogue as a valid source of ideas and inspiration.

As noted already, Trilling used the idea of the moral imagination throughout his work, but the idea had been in circulation for some time; as far as we know the first person to use it was the philosopher and politician Edmund Burke in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Since then it has been adopted for use by a range of scholars in a variety of disciplines, including historians such as Gertrude Himmelfarb, sociologists such as Patricia Harris and Vicki Williams, religious scholars like Russell Kirk and even business management specialists such as Patricia H. Werhane.

Interest in the idea of the moral imagination was kick-started by philosophers when they began to use fiction as a way of exploring and illustrating their philosophical perceptions. In 1983, philosopher Martha Nussbaum undertook an analysis of Henry James's *The Golden Bowl* in a manner that was reminiscent of Trilling's essay on *The Princess Casamassima*. However, Nussbaum brought to bear perspectives drawn from the theoretical frameworks of moral and aesthetic philosophy. Her debt to Trilling was further evidenced in her later essay titled "The Narrative Imagination" (*Cultivating Humanity* 85-112) in which she once again argued for the essentially moral qualities of narrative.

Nussbaum asserts that attempts to strip literature of its socio-political and moral context and to approach criticism through nothing but the text—to see the aesthetic as something that can be appreciated in the abstract without social context—fails to appreciate how inextricably these elements of our experience are bound together. She points out that the

idea that it is possible to take such an abstract aesthetic approach is not new. The New Criticism of the mid twentieth century, in her view, exhibited the same flaws as some the contemporary theories do:

For this reason it [the New Criticism] was resisted by some of the finest minds in the field [of literary studies], among them British moral critic F. R. Leavis and American social thinker Lionel Trilling. Both of these men had a political agenda. Trilling's *The Liberal Imagination* made explicit his own commitment to liberalism and democracy, and argued brilliantly that the novel as genre is committed to liberalism in its very form, in the way in which it shows respect for the individuality and the privacy of each human mind. He connected his criticism of Henry James very closely with his general social criticism. The *Liberal Imagination* juxtaposes essays on James with essays on contemporary social issues. (*Cultivating Humanity* 104-05)

Other philosophers, notably Gregory Currie, expanded on Nussbaum's theme. In 1995 he wrote:

I hold that, in so far as there is a role for imagination in helping us to see through a moral issue or to make a moral choice, that role is undertaken by the same mental mechanism that is deployed when we read or—if we have the right talents and inclinations—create fictional works. (250)

Such a proposition has important implications for the way we think not only about morality but also about literature itself, how we read it and how we write it. It is not clear whether the entry of philosophers into the field of literary analysis and their championing of Trilling forced literary scholars also to re-evaluate him but I suspect that it had more to do with a shift in focus in the broader culture which affected thinking in both philosophy and literary studies.

In 1999, John Rodden published *Lionel Trilling and the Critics: Opposing Selves*, which gathered up a large number of essays, reviews and book excerpts about Trilling—both positive and negative—that had been published from the 1940s onwards. While Rodden is interested in issues of literary reputation, my own interest in Trilling is much more in terms of the major tenets of his critical and creative approach and whether these have any relevance for a writer in the early twenty-first century. However, Rodden's introduction to

his book offers a remarkably good overview of Trilling's life and work and its reception. He concludes by saying:

Two decades after his death numerous critics remain engaged by the intricate dialectic of the literary and private personality of Lionel Trilling, still an elusive presence lurking at and yet above "the dark and bloody crossroads" of New York literary politics and American intellectual life, ever a quietly controversial figure in all his radiantly opposing selves. (20)

The personal trajectory of Mark Krupnick, Professor of Literature at the University of Chicago, exemplifies the attitudes of many other English Literature academics of his generation. As Rodden puts it: "An admirer of Trilling as an undergraduate, Krupnick turned sharply critical of Trilling in the late 1960s and early '70s. Since the 1980s he has rediscovered Trilling and observed new and enduring qualities in him worthy of admiration" (291). Krupnick came to appreciate Trilling's refusal to accept over-simplified views of society, his insistence on nuance and complication. He also regarded Trilling's capacity for self-criticism, his willingness to attempt to comprehend new trends in the context of their historical evolution and his role as a public intellectual as a model for contemporary academics. I find myself in agreement with his summation of Trilling's importance. An important part of my motivation in choosing the topic of this exegesis is a desire to look more closely at how nuance, complication and historical context might affect the way moral issues are treated in fictional works.

One of the most influential contributions to Trilling's comeback was the 2011 book *Why Trilling Matters* by Adam Kirsch, an American poet and critic. Kirsch's work prompted another enthusiastic round of re-evaluative essays and reviews from academics and critics in a climate that seemed more sympathetic than even that of the late 1990s when Rodden's book was reviewed. Kirsch's principal argument is that a return to reading Trilling's major critical works reminds us that the reading and writing of literature offers primarily a personal experience both for the reader and the writer. In Kirsch's view, Trilling saw the experience of interacting with literature as a crucial part of shaping the self and its relationship with other individuals as well as with the culture of the society at large. Kirsch notes the strong interest in, and influence of, Freud in Trilling's work, especially in the way imagination could shape the development of an individual's personality.

Kirsch concludes his book with a quote from Trilling that sums up much of Kirsch's argument about why the man still matters:

To assert what in our day will seem a difficult idea even to people of great moral sensitivity—that one may live a real life apart from the group, that one may exist as an actual person not only at the center of society but at its margins, that one's values may be none the less real and valuable because they do not prevail and are even rejected and submerged ... That this needs to be said suggests the peculiar threat to the individual that our society offers. (Trilling, *A Gathering of Fugitives* 107)

Kirsch's book appeared on the literary scene in the context of a major shift in thinking about literature and the place of fiction in the contemporary world, as the assumptions and preoccupations of the postmodernists began to lose traction. The opening decade of the twenty-first century produced a rash of articles and books taking another critical look at the entire postmodernist movement. For example, in 2006, Alan Kirby, an English writer and literary scholar, argued in an article entitled "The Death of Postmodernism" that evidence for its postmodernism's decline lies in the movement of contemporary art practice away from postmodernist form, rather than in what is taking place among academic theorists. Similarly, Edward Docx gave his 2011 article the elegiac title "Postmodernism is Dead". The essay begins with an appreciative overview of the fruits of postmodernism, its playfulness, its insights and its championing of alternative views of the world but goes on to point out its deficiencies:

Gradually we hear more and more affirmation for those who can render expertly ... Jonathan Franzen is the great example here: ... he eschews the evasions of genre or historical fiction or postmodern narratorial strategies and instead tries to say something complex and intelligent and telling and authentic and well-written about his own time ... These three ideas, of specificity, of values and of authenticity, are at odds with postmodernism. We are entering a new age. Let's call it the Age of Authenticism and see how we get on. (Docz)

These sentiments echo the views of Trilling, who even titled one of his books *Sincerity and Authenticity*. The concerns of the post-postmodern world have helped make the reconsideration of Trilling and of the place of morality within fiction possible.

Vera Nünning has made similar observations on recent developments in English fiction, advancing the proposition that the contemporary novel is flourishing in Britain and that it exhibits four main characteristics:

First the return of ethical questions and the revival of narrative, second a concern with popular culture, often expresses in a language that is deemed ‘not literary’ third the increasing interest in the topics of cultural memory and national identity and fourth a merging of realism and experiment. (236)

She goes on to suggest that “The return to ethics is probably the most widespread tendency in contemporary fiction” and cites Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*, Graham Swift’s *Last Orders* and Michael Frayn’s *Headlong* as examples. I would add to this list several Australian novels: Tim Winton’s *Eyrie*, Anthony Macris’s *Capital Volume One*, Christos Tsiolkas’s *Barracuda* and Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River*.

The widely praised critic James Wood has championed the idea that the capacity to engage the imagination of a reader in a lively consideration of culturally significant human issues is a crucial ingredient to look for when assessing the value of any piece of fiction. For these reasons, Cynthia Ozick, in a *Harpers* magazine article in 2007, sees him as a throwback to Trilling:

Surely we have not heard a critical mind like this at work since Trilling’s *The Liberal Imagination*. The key is indebtedness. The key is connectedness. If Wood cannot read Flaubert without thinking of McEwan, neither can he read McEwan without thinking of Flaubert ... What is needed is a thicket—a forest—of Woods.

Enthusiasm for Wood’s work is just part of a shift in contemporary thinking that has brought back into the frame of literary criticism, as well as that of literary practice, questions of ethics and the moral imagination. In 2014, David Bromwich, a professor of English at Yale, published a book called *Moral Imagination* from which I obtained the definition I used at the beginning of this chapter. Bromwich, like Trilling, uses literary references in his analysis of contemporary American life and politics. He turns to traditional texts to help define his idea of what it means to exercise a moral imagination:

‘The great secret of morals,’ wrote Shelley in *A Defence of Poetry*, ‘is love; or a going out of our nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which

exists in thought action or person not our own.' One remarkable thing about this definition is its refusal to confine the object of identification to a person; we may equally sympathize with an action or a thought: an extension and decomposition of the idea of sympathy that seems consistent with Shelley's most original poetry. (Bromwich 12)

Much as I find myself in full sympathy with the concept of the moral imagination and see it as an essential ingredient of any civilised culture I have a problem with much of the current trend to discredit all that has been labelled postmodern. Like Trilling, I tend to be suspicious of simple binaries. I do not believe it is necessary to pronounce postmodernism dead in order to view fiction through a moral lens. Postmodernism may be slipping from fashion but in my view the various perspectives it offers should now be regarded as part of the rich history of literary thought from which both critics and practitioners may draw. Just as it was a mistake to forget about Trilling and some of the other great critics of the past, so it would be an error to forget how useful the various critical lenses that have been brought to bear on texts since the 1960s have been in extending the very empathetic approach to alterity that Trilling recommended.

Conclusion

The recent return of interest in the work and thought of Lionel Trilling and the idea of the moral imagination gives rise to a number of questions. At a general level there is a question for the whole field of literary criticism: what is shifting in the discipline that makes a discredited critic from the 1950s interesting again? And then there is the more specific question of what the renewed interest might mean for the reader and writer of literary fiction today. In this thesis I have summarised the main thrust of Trilling's ideas and discussed their critical reception in three stages: his ascendancy, his fall from grace, and his current rehabilitation. I have then gone on to consider the implications of his ideas for the writing of fiction, with particular reference to my own literary project, which engages the concept of the moral imagination in the writing of a novel set in contemporary times.

The first stage of Trilling's trajectory occurred during the Cold War, a period when his fusion of cultural criticism with literary criticism had great appeal. It was a time when many intellectuals were re-thinking their commitment to communism and seeking better ways of understanding the forces at work in their society. Trilling's idea that literature could and should play a vital part in assisting in the clarification of ideas by cultivating in readers a capacity to imagine unfamiliar situations and moral dilemmas from points of view at variance with their own had real power at that time. His readership was being confronted with the necessity to make sense of a world in which social and cultural norms were changing at a rapid pace. His emphasis on the content of a literary work, its underlying philosophy and ethical stance rather than on its form and style, was appealing to the intellectuals of the post-war period.

The second stage arose during the period of the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s. The postmodernists reacted against the dominant views of critics such as Trilling and began to use the lenses of postcolonialism, feminism, historicism and reader response to evaluate fictional works. Despite the fact that Trilling had much sympathy with marginalised people in society, and although the whole thrust of his critical argument was to call for an inclusion of different voices, it is undoubtedly true that he himself was one of the great white establishment males that came under attack in this time. He found postmodern developments confronting but took the position during the 1960s and 1970s that he should

examine what was going on around him in its cultural and historical context. I have taken the same approach in this exegesis, reviewing changes in attitudes to Trilling in their cultural and historical contexts.

Thirdly, in the current period, where technology and speed of travel bring all the earth's tribes together, we need to return to the concept that our most important identity is our human identity. Trilling's assertion that the moral imagination could be used to allow us to understand and connect with the other is consistent with such a view. Appeal to the moral imagination is also relevant in the specific field of our literature. Those of us wanting to write or even to read fiction in the contemporary world can expand our creative horizons by displaying both a sensitivity to the specific and an embrace of the whole. It would seem that these two moral realities are not incompatible, as Trilling, the great integrator of apparently opposed ideas, would surely have urged.

Since Trilling's time, the developments in thinking about the moral imagination and how it applies in the literary context are matters that merit further study. There is a rich vein of transdisciplinary work emerging in this field and it is one I intend to explore further as my practice-led research progresses.

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Pages 37-69 of this thesis have been removed as they contain creative component.